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Penitential Experience in Renaissance Romance

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Penitential Experience in Renaissance Romance

by

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In loving memory of Rives Fleming, Jr.

He was troubled by the thought of how easy it was for a man to wreck his whole life in a single wrong act. After that the guy suffered forever, no matter what he did to make up for the wrong. At times, as the clerk had sat in his room late at night, a book held stiffly in his reddened hands, his head numb although he wore a hat, he felt a strange falling away from the printed page and had this crazy sensation that he was reading about himself. At first this picked him up but then it deeply depressed him.

Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*

To dream of a one-time future reformation may well serve to dispel the fear that reformation is something he needs now and always.

Harry Berger, Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors*

“Less shame washes away a greater fault than yours,” said the master. “Therefore unburden yourself of all sadness, and do not forget that I am always at your side.”

Dante, *Inferno*

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Penitential Experience in Renaissance Romance

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This dissertation analyzes English Renaissance representations of penitential experience: the emotions of guilt, shame, remorse, and regret, and the practices by which people respond to those emotions. I consider penitential episodes in Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596), and William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611) alongside works of practical divinity that popularized Protestant penitential doctrines for lay readers, including sermons, treatises, and devotional handbooks. Penitence is traditionally understood as a means to an end: divine forgiveness, renewal as a better self, or reconciliation with those we have harmed. But my dissertation highlights episodes of frustrated, failed, and endless penitence, in which characters feel genuine remorse for their past wrongdoing and struggle to make amends for it but fear that their efforts can never be sufficient to reach the endpoints they seek.

The romance texts in my study reveal the emotional strain and uncertainty wrought by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, which radically altered traditional approaches to penitence. Reformers redefined penitence not as satisfaction for the debt of

sin, but as a radical self-transformation that only God could initiate. Historians have long recognized this shift as a crucial center of controversy in the period, but critics have only recently begun to consider how imaginative literature responded to it. I demonstrate that Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare confront the painful emotional consequences of Protestant doctrine and imagine alternative, more livable forms of penitence for secular life. They do so in part by staging penitential narratives in fictive pagan settings, where characters must confront their guilt without the aid of Christian ritual structures and consolations. Against the grain of a culture that valued divine salvation above all else and shifted responsibility for that salvation into the hands of an unknowable God, these authors restore attention to the practical and social dimensions of penitence as a lived experience within this world.

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Introduction

OVERVIEW

This dissertation analyzes English Renaissance representations of penitential experience: the emotions of guilt, shame, remorse, and regret, and the practices by which we respond to those emotions.¹ I consider penitential episodes in three romance texts from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: Philip Sidney's prose romance *Arcadia* (1590), Edmund Spenser's allegorical epic *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596), and William Shakespeare's tragicomic play *The Winter's Tale* (1611). Penitence is traditionally understood as a means to an end: divine forgiveness, renewal as a better self, or reconciliation with those we have harmed. But my dissertation highlights episodes of frustrated, failed, and endless penitence, in which characters struggle to make amends for past wrongdoing but sense that their efforts can never be sufficient to reach the endpoints they seek.

These literary romances respond to the emotional strain and uncertainty wrought by the Protestant Reformation, which radically altered traditional approaches to penitence in England. In place of the traditional Catholic understanding of penitence as *satisfaction* for the debt of sin, reformers introduced a model of penitence as a radical *transformation* of the sinful

¹ A note on terminology: I use the terms "penitence" and "penitential experience" in my own general descriptions of these feelings and practices because these terms are more inclusive, and more neutral with regard to Reformation-era controversies, than the closely related terms "penance" and "repentance." As I will explain below, these latter two words became controversial in the period because they implied rival views of how salvation works and how the Church ought to discipline and console sinners. Protestant reformers struck the term "penance" from English Bible translations in order to assert that the Catholic sacrament of penance had no basis in scripture; in its place, they favored "repentance," which they defined as self-transformation.

self, a transformation that only God could initiate. Reformers radically diminished the value of human action in the process of redemption by abolishing traditional penitential practices such as private confession and priestly absolution. Historians have long recognized this shift as a crucial center of controversy in the period, but critics have only recently begun to consider how imaginative literature responded to it. I demonstrate that Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare confront the painful emotional consequences of Protestant doctrine and imagine alternative, more livable forms of penitence for secular life. They do so in part by staging penitential narratives in fictive Greco-Roman settings, where characters struggle through guilt without the aid of Christian ritual structures and consolations.

Against the grain of a religious culture that valued divine salvation above all else and shifted responsibility for that salvation into the hands of an unknowable God, these authors restore attention to the practical and social dimensions of penitence as a lived experience within this world. The Church of England emphasized two endpoints for penitential experience: the sinner's rebirth as an utterly "new creature" within this life, and his salvation in the next. But Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare use the romance mode's characteristic structures of deferral and dilation to imagine alternative outcomes for penitence. Their penitential episodes conclude not with absolute, divinely initiated redemption, but with more provisional, incremental changes effected by human work, such as a hard-hearted character's newfound capacity for compassion and the fragile reconciliation of an estranged family.

To illustrate how Renaissance romance renders the subjective experience of penitence as an endless struggle, I begin with a representative scene from Sidney's *Arcadia*. Throughout the first half of this fiction, Gynecia, the wife of Arcadia's monarch Basilius, has

struggled with her adulterous desire for a young man: her daughter's suitor, Pyrocles. She condemns herself severely but cannot stop herself from pursuing him: obsessive desire overrides her penitence as well as her family commitments. One night Gynecia dresses in her finest clothes, leaves her home, and walks to a cave in the forest where she hopes to rendezvous with Pyrocles. She brings along a golden cup of liquor, which she believes is love potion, for him to drink. When she arrives, however, Gynecia finds her own husband Basilius there instead. Before she can stop him, Basilius drinks from her golden cup and collapses to the ground. Although Gynecia never meant to kill her husband, she feels responsible for his death. On top of the remorse she already felt for her adulterous desires, this sense of responsibility drives her to a crisis of conscience:

Her had straight filled her with the true shapes of all the fore-past mischiefs: her reason began to cry out against the filthy rebellion of sinful sense, and to tear itself with anguish for having made so weak a resistance; her conscience, a terrible witness of the inward wickedness, still nourishing this debateful fire: her complaint now not having an end to be directed unto, something to disburthen sorrow, but a necessary downfall of inward wretchedness...She thus with lamentable demeanor spake: "O bottomless pit of sorrow in which I cannot contain myself, having the firebrands of all furies within me; still falling, and yet by the infiniteness of it never fallen! Neither can I rid myself, being fettered with the everlasting consideration of it. Whither should I recommend the protection of my dishonored fall? To the earth? It hath no life...To men, who are always cruel in their neighbours' faults, and make others' overthrow become the badge of their ill-masked virtue? To the heavens? O unspeakable torment of conscience which dare not look unto them! No sin can enter there." ²

This scene is saturated with the language of endlessness. Gynecia experiences her remorse as "infiniteness," a nightmare of continuous falling through a "bottomless pit." This image implies that even death—the pain and devastation of finally hitting the ground—would be preferable to this continuous anguish. This is precisely the end to which Gynecia

² *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, 729.

resigns herself moments later as she lies down beside her husband, resolving to die there, “if so much the angry gods will grant [her].”³ This fantasy of “still falling”—that is, falling continuously—corresponds to the relentless operation of her conscience, “still nourishing this debateful fire.” Gynecia considers her present suffering even more painful than her unrequited love because it lacks “an end to be directed unto.” Penitential and erotic frustrations are closely linked in *Arcadia*, but for Gynecia, penitence is ultimately the more debilitating of the two. Previously, her complaints were directed towards the “end” (a term that here connotes both purpose and conclusion) of winning Pyrocles’ love, an outcome that would “disburthen sorrow” if she could ever attain it. But she cannot imagine any endpoint that would release her from her current anguish.

Any Christian clergyman in Sidney’s time would have had ready answers for a tortured penitent like Gynecia. A Catholic priest would have advised her to confess, do penance proportional to her sins, and receive absolution. A Protestant minister would have counseled her to repent, acknowledge that she can never be worthy of forgiveness, and faithfully entrust herself to the mercy of Jesus, whose sacrifice had already achieved the remission of her sins. In the generations following the Reformation of the English church, counsel of this second kind flowed continuously from the pulpit and press. But no such consolation is available in *Arcadia*, a setting that includes angry and vengeful gods but no redeemer. “The heavens,” Gynecia believes, are irrevocably closed to people like her: “no sin can enter there.” This is a scene of pain without redemption.

³ Ibid., 730.

Sidney's use of Christian commonplaces (such as the conscience as witness and sin as "filthy" defilement) signals that he is evoking a Christian psychological struggle in this passage. But by displacing this struggle into a pagan setting ambiguously overseen by the Greco-Roman gods, Sidney separates it from the comforting resolutions offered by Christianity. He highlights the self-laceration entailed by Christian guilt—indeed, he amplifies it to melodramatic extremes—but he removes the endpoint of salvation that might have given Gynecia's suffering a sense of purpose and salutary value. This is the dynamic my dissertation is about: romance fictions separating penitential pain from Christian redemption. I am not claiming that Sidney chooses his Arcadian setting primarily in order to stage this thought experiment, or even that penitence stands out as a chief concern among the hundreds of topics explored in this sprawling, encyclopedic fiction.⁴ Rather, I claim that the medium of imaginative fiction in general, and romance in particular, enables Sidney to think through the difficulties of penitential experience.

What might be the purpose of this separation? One possible answer is that Sidney is using this fiction to teach his readers a moral lesson: he presents this disturbing spectacle of penitence without a redeemer in order to spur his own readers to repent, perhaps with a deepened sense of gratitude that, unlike this suffering character, they have access to Christian pathways toward redemption. This lesson would be especially effective for readers who have sympathized with Gynecia all along, identifying with her wayward desires, and

⁴ Sidney's work in other genres, however, does reveal an abiding interest in Christian soteriology. In the years after he composed the first version of *Arcadia*, Sidney wrote translations of the Psalms with his sister Mary and began a translation of *A Worke on the Trewness of the Christian Religion*, a treatise by the French Protestant Philippe Duplessis-Mornay.

who would thus experience her punishment as an instructive rebuke to their own moral weaknesses. This reading of Gynecia's suffering would reinforce a long-standing critical practice of reading the work of Protestant imaginative writers as an attempt to discipline and reform the reader. This critical approach holds that English Protestant writers tell stories of sin in order to elicit identification and subsequent repentance in readers, and they use wanton and suspicious literary genres like chivalric romance in order to scrub these modes clean and recuperate them for a Protestant cause.⁵ They are interested in penitential feelings like guilt and shame principally because these feelings, when aroused in readers, can be conduits for moral instruction. But I propose a different account of these poets' relation to Protestant culture.⁶

Romance writers did not seek to press their writing into the didactic service of the Church, promoting Protestant orthodoxy and punishing deviations from it. They are neither radicals nor schoolmasters nor preachers—though, like preachers, they try to isolate and interrogate the trouble spots that make faith-alone penitence hard to endure. What they offer is neither a realistic portrayal of lived penitential experience nor a utopian fantasy of penitence at its best. Rather, they use the freedom of the Sidneian poet who “nothing affirmeth” to render fantastical, larger-than-life scenes of penitence. They do not discount

⁵ See Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (1967), and Tiffany Werth, *The Fabulous Dark Cloister: Romance in England After the Reformation* (2011). See Alan Hager, *Dazzling Images*, on “retroactive reading” in Sidney.

⁶ In this story, the doctrine itself is unstable, in flux, beset by polemical controversy from above and practical difficulties from below. Moreover, it remains in many ways bound up with Catholic traditions. (For example, preachers maintained allowance for rituals of social reconciliation.) Protestant penitential experience was a complex tissue of interwoven traditions and theories, from the traditional to the secular.

the possibility of becoming a better self, learning from experience, but they present this process as slow, labored, and troublesome, and sometimes impossible to finish.

THE DEED'S CREATURE AND THE NEW CREATURE

Penitence is a struggle to release the past's grip on our actions. A remorseful subject like Gynecia may well wish to erase her past wrongdoing and its consequences altogether, but since this is impossible, what other possibilities remain? To use the vocabulary of a popular medieval penitential manual, what are the practical options for "handling sin"?⁷ One

⁷ Robert Mannyng's 1303 book of penitential exempla and commentary in verse, *Handlyng Synne* (Ed. Idelle Sullens [Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983]. Mannyng begins with a prologue that explores the trope of "handling" derived from the title of his French source, the *Manuel des Peches*:

Manuel ys handlyng wyth hond,
"Pecches ys synne, y undyrstonde.
These twey wrdys that been otwynne,
Do hem to gedyr, ys handlyng synne...
We handle synne every day
Yn wyrd & dede all that we may. (83-86, 89-90)

In an essay on *Handlyng Synne* that has influenced my understanding of penitence as a subjective experience inextricably embedded in social relations and everyday practices of living with guilt, Mark Miller explicates Mannyng's concept of "handling" as follows: "Sin is a rock-bottom fact of human life, a condition that cannot be escaped no matter how virtuous we are: in our daily words and deeds we handle sin, we get it on our hands, for it is all around us... We deal with it as well as we can; we handle the inevitable fact of it by trying to go on in spite of it, confronting and resisting it as far as we are able. This aspect of the handleability of sin—the fact that, however beyond our grasp the situation of our sinfulness may seem to be, we are capable of handling it 'with our hands,' grabbing hold of the material of our moral lives and working on it—suggests the way in which Mannyng's therapeutic discourse might take hold." ("Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: Handlyng Synne and the Perspective of Agency," *Speculum* 3 [1996], 613). The condition Miller describes, of sinfulness feeling largely "beyond our grasp," was intensified by the Reformation, which diminished human participation in the process of salvation and redefined repentance as an experience that could only be wrought upon the sinner by God's initiative. Penitential manuals like Mannyng's were no longer widely circulated in England after the Reformation, but practical divinity inherited some of the functions of this genre.

option is to take compensatory action to make up for what you have done: make restitution, restore what you stole, inflict suffering on yourself in proportion to the suffering you caused others, or perform ritual acts of penance to merit absolution from God. Another is to change your life: to learn from past experience and transform yourself into a better person, if not an altogether new person.

Living with sin requires a subject to navigate between two conceptual extremes: being consumed by past transgressions, on one hand, and being utterly redeemed from them, on the other. For sixteenth-century Protestants, the first of these extremes was represented by Judas, who sees no way to go on living with himself after betraying Jesus—no way to pay down his crime or put it behind him. The idea of personal change for the better is impossibly remote from this story. Judas's action constrains his identity even after his death; he dies as a traitor, and thereafter, throughout Christian history, he is memorialized as a bad example of treachery as well as failed penitence. The second extreme was associated with St. Paul, whose sudden conversion into a new man on the road to Damascus was regarded as an iconic example of penitence at its best: destruction of the sinful old man and rebirth as a new man.

Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to these two versions of penitent subjectivity as *the deed's creature*, a phrase drawn Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's tragedy *The Changeling*, and *the new creature*, a phrase drawn from scripture and theology. In *The*

One such function was to teach believers how to handle sin in ordinary life—how to learn from sin, live through it, and make partial amends for it, even while recognizing that salvation and damnation in the afterlife remain entirely beyond our grasp.

Changeling, De Flores uses the phrase “the deed’s creature” to confront Beatrice-Joanna with her responsibility for the murder she commissioned him to carry out. When Beatrice tries to disown the guilt for this crime and tries to separate herself from De Flores by invoking her noble birth, De Flores replies:

Push, fly not to your birth, but settle you
In what the act has made you; y’are no more now.
You must forget your parentage to me:
Y’are the deed’s creature; by that name you lost
Your first condition; and I challenge you
As peace and innocency has turned you out
And made you one with me. (134-139)

The deed’s creature is utterly defined by her past sins; they make her who she is. She cannot reform or change the identity that has overtaken her; she can only serve as a cautionary example to others. Spenser’s Despair speaks for this condition. As De Flores’ phrase “settle you/in what the act has made you” implies, the condition of the deed’s creature has its seductions; to consider yourself the deed’s creature is to resign yourself to the impossibility of reform. The phrase *the new creature*, based on Pauline injunctions to kill the old man and become a new man, was used in Protestant practical divinity to refer to the penitent subject regenerated by divine grace: “clean altered and changed,” to quote the Homily, so that no trace of his former sinful self remains.

The deed’s creature’s possibilities for future action are constrained by her past sins. Beatrice-Joanna learns this the hard way. Like Lady Macbeth, she can never wash the guilty blood from her hands; her crime alters her irreversibly. The new creature is remade by divine agency, whose external force is vividly illustrated by the image of St. Paul being violently knocked off of his horse on the road to Damascus. These two ways of relating to one’s past

actions represent tragic and comic versions of penitence. Romance, a hybrid mode that incorporates tragic and comic elements, provided a fertile medium for imagining penitence between these extremes.

ON PROTESTANT EXPERIENCE

These imaginative writers each write in response to a dominant Protestant culture, but their representations of penitence do not neatly affirm Protestant orthodoxies. On the contrary, their work sometimes attests to the continuities between Catholic and Protestant regimes—continuities that emerged in spite of theologians' efforts to distinguish the two sides and demonize their opponents. For example, Spenser's Protestant House of Holiness, administered by agents of the True Church, includes apparently sacramental elements. The fictional renderings of penitence that I consider thus support the findings of "post-revisionist" historians, who interpret the English Reformation as a prolonged and complex process in which Catholic, Protestant, and secular discourses continually influenced one another.⁸

⁸This "post-revisionist" perspective is now widely embraced as an alternative to celebratory narratives that hail the Reformation as a progression towards an enlightened modernity and revisionist narratives that describe it as a devastating loss imposed upon an unwilling populace from the top down. For a brief overview of these conflicting perspectives and the emergence of post-revisionist scholarship, see Peter Marshall, "(Re)Defining the English Reformation," 564-569. A.G. Dickens' *The English Reformation* (1964) is the most frequently cited example of the celebratory narrative. Leading revisionists include Eamon Duffy, John Bossy, and J.J. Scarisbrick. Studies of Renaissance literature influenced by revisionist accounts of the Reformation include James Simpson, *Burning to Read*, and Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*. Debora Shuger critiques revisionist accounts of penance in "The Reformation of Penance," which I discuss at length below. "Post-revisionist" histories that reinterpret "the Reformation" as a prolonged process of multiple intertwined reformations include Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations*; Diarmaid

My use of the inclusive confessional label “Protestant” reflects this study’s emphasis on the continuities and shared tropes that characterized English penitential experience, an emphasis that comes at the cost of more careful attention to the sectarian divisions that divided English Protestants during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. My choice to use the term “Protestant” is informed by Alec Ryrie’s argument that “early modern Protestantism was a *broad-based* religious culture” and that “the division between puritan and conformist Protestants, which has been so important in English historiography, almost fades from view when examined through the lens of devotion and lived experience.”⁹ Many recent historians of the Reformation have called into question the opposition between “Puritanism” and “Anglicanism” that prevailed in earlier generations of English literary and cultural studies.¹⁰ The influential revisionist work of Nicholas Tyacke has persuaded many scholars of Reformation history that from the Elizabethan Settlement through the ascendance of Archbishop William Laud, Calvinist doctrines—including predestination, the total corruption of the human will, and the worthlessness of penitential works—constituted a mainstream consensus among English Protestants.¹¹ These doctrines were embraced as

MacCulloch, *Reformation*; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*; and Alexandra Walsham, “Migrations of the Holy” and *Providence in Early Modern England*.

⁹ Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation England*, 6.

¹⁰ For a recent overview of these controversies, see Peter Marshall, “The Naming of Protestant England,” *Past and Present* 214 (2012), 87-128.

¹¹ Tyacke advanced the thesis of a “Calvinist Consensus” in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church in his 1973 article, “Puritanism, Arminianism, and Counter-Revolution,” reprinted in Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism c. 1530-1700* (Manchester University Press, 2001), 132-155. He elaborated this argument in *Anti-Calvinists: the rise of English Arminianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). John Stachniewski argues that in light of these developments in historical scholarship, literary critics must re-evaluate our understanding of Elizabethan and Jacobean religious culture, which has been too centered on the “assumed

orthodoxy by the Church of England and diffused through the popular press by writers of practical divinity, including the prolific Calvinist divine William Perkins.¹²

The historical dispute about the predominance of Calvinism in the teaching of the Church of England is beyond the scope of this project. My concern is not to establish that Calvinism was the only orthodox theology available to Elizabethan believers; nor do I claim that any of the authors in this study should be identified as a puritan. For my purposes, the important point is that English Protestants across the denominational spectrum shared basic convictions about penitence that reflected the widespread diffusion of Calvinist theological ideas well beyond communities that openly professed allegiance to the Reformed church in Geneva. Popular treatises on penitence in the period were typically consistent with Calvinist soteriology in denying that a sinner's penitential efforts could merit or influence his salvation. Even as diverse factions of English Protestants entered into heated divisions about matters of church liturgy, ceremony, and episcopal authority, they evinced a remarkable level of agreement regarding penitential doctrine.

In short, when I speak of "Protestant" penitential doctrine, I refer to a broad consensus comprising the following four claims: 1) the sacrament of penance has no basis in scripture, 2) penitential works cannot satisfy the debt of sin, 3) repentance is defined as a thorough transformation of the self, and 4) the sinner cannot initiate that transformation on her own. The Protestant position comprised of these four claims emerged as an oppositional

existence of a benevolent religion known usually as 'moderate Anglicanism'" (*The Persecutory Imagination*, 219-221).

¹² See Dewey Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 29-111, on the circulation of Calvinist thinking through printed media.

response to Catholic traditions of sacramental penance, and it was widely shared even by believers who did not regard themselves as Calvinists.

The mainstream predominance of the four points listed above is evident in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Elizabethan Church, which repudiate the Roman sacrament of penance and affirm predestinarian soteriology. Article XXV denies the sacramental status of penance; Article XVII states that God has predestined individuals for salvation or damnation “before the foundations of the world were laid”; Article XI states that men are justified by faith alone, and not by “our own works or deservings”; and Article X states that we have “no power to do good works” at all unless prevenient grace gives us the will to do so. The Church of England’s position on penitence is more fully elaborated in the three-part “Homily of Repentance and Reconciliation unto God,” which was first published in the Second Book of the Elizabethan Church’s *Certaine Sermones or Homilies* in 1563 and regularly re-issued in subsequent editions until the Civil War.¹³ I will frequently refer to this state-issued Homily throughout this study because it constitutes a definitive statement of the Church of England’s penitential doctrine in the period and because its mandatory circulation to every church in the nation would likely have made it a shared point of reference for Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and their audiences.¹⁴

¹³ “An Homilie of Repentance, and of true reconciliation unto God,” in *Certain Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I*, edited by Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), 256-274. Subsequent in-text citations refer to this edition.

¹⁴ On the circulation of the *Homilies*, see the Introduction to Rickey and Stroup’s facsimile of the 1623 edition, v-xii. The editors claim that the Homilies were second only to the Book of Common Prayer as the most widely known and influential religious writings during Elizabeth’s reign (viii).

The Homily emphatically denies that sinners can participate in their own salvation or even choose to repent on their own. It opens with a caution to “beware and take heed, that we do in no wise think...that we are able to repent aright, or to turn effectually unto the Lord by our own might and strength.” Our inability to repent “aright” stems from our general incapacity to act or think in ways that please God: “Of ourselves we are not able as much as to think a good thought.” If we do manage to repent, it is only because God has wrought repentance in us: “It is God that worketh in us both the will and the deed.”

The Homily defines repentance as “the conversion or turning again of the whole man unto God.” We cannot turn ourselves, but we can pray that God will “vouchsafe by his holy spirit, to work a true and unfained repentance in us.” “Turn me, O Lord,” the Homily urges listeners to pray, “and I shall be turned.” The Homily reveals that this denial of human initiative in the process of human repentance was not the position of a nonconformist minority, but an orthodox view promoted by the Church of England at its highest levels.

This sense that sinners are unable to “think so much as a good thought” on their own created practical difficulties for post-Reformation English ministers and their congregations. It is one thing to ridicule and discourage Catholic practices—to tell your flock, “do not confess to a priest, do not practice sacramental penance”—but what could preachers tell the afflicted to do instead? Even commentators who affirmed the worthlessness of human efforts in the economy of salvation had to provide some measure of practical guidance for the here and now. This became a more consequential concern in the generations following the abolition of sacramental penance. Granting that we are helpless to

participate in our ultimate salvation after death, what can we do about sin, shame and guilt in the interim, here in the world?

In the course of this study, I will use the term “secular” to refer to the practices that sought to answer this question: those that unfold among human agents in this world. I use the term as religious traditions have used it, to designate “secular time” as a contrast to other-worldly processes of judgment, salvation, and damnation.¹⁵ I do not use it to suggest that the writers who envisioned this-worldly penitential practices were in any sense hostile to religion or separated from religious culture, or to suggest that the reformation of penance contributed to the advance of a disenchanted modernity. On the contrary, the “secular” visions of penitence that my dissertation describes arise directly in relation to, and remain inextricable from, the challenges of Christian life in the period.

Two of the authors I consider, Sidney and Spenser, were personally committed to Protestant causes, but they nonetheless participated in the creation of secular forms of penitence. They undertook this creation in part by using Arcadian settings as “second worlds” that remove a Christian redeemer from the equation of penitential experience.¹⁶ But this is not to say that these writers adopted a subversive stance with regard to Protestant orthodoxy, or that they offered their art as a replacement for the traditional ritual and social functions of Christianity (a claim that many critics have made about Shakespeare, especially in readings of *The Winter’s Tale*). Rather, the project of adapting Christian tenets into secular time and human labor was a way for these authors to participate in the same struggle that engaged contemporary pastors and doctors: to make penitence possible to live through, and

¹⁵ On secular time, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 55.

¹⁶ Harry Berger, Jr., “Second World and Green World.”

to mitigate the painful gaps that many believers had come to perceive between penitential theory and practice.

By investigating how Protestant people managed to tolerate and live with the doctrine of predestination,¹⁷ my dissertation takes up the concerns of Max Weber's controversial 1904 study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹⁸ Weber's secularization thesis—the claim that the Protestant Reformation contributed to the rise of a disenchanted modernity—has been widely challenged by historians who emphasize the continuities between Catholic and Reformed religious practices and the many ways in which early modern Protestant culture remained hospitable to magical and supernatural beliefs. Recent work by Euan Cameron, Alexandra Walsham, and others has qualified Weber's claim that the abolition of sacramental aids to salvation hastened the “elimination of magic” from Christian experience.¹⁹ Although I share these scholars' objections to Weber's narrative of secularization, I do not dispute his claim that the psychological dilemmas of Reformation soteriology gave rise to a Protestant work ethic. Weber holds that in response to the anxiety wrought by the Reformation in general (which denied that works could earn salvation) and Calvinism in particular (which stated that no human actions could alter God's predestined

¹⁷ This is the central question of John Stachniewski's study of despair in early modern literature, which generally affirms Weber's account of the Reformation's emotional consequences. Referring to the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, Stachniewski wonders, “how, socially and psychologically, did people live with these ideas?” (*The Persecutory Imagination*, 14).

¹⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*, Fourth Edition, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 107. See Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-28, and Alexandra Walsham, “The Reformation and ‘The Disenchantment of the World’ Reassessed,” *The Historical Journal* 51.2 (June 2008): 497-528.

decree of election and damnation), good works and commercial prosperity became understood not as means toward the end of salvation, but as signs of divine election.²⁰ For Weber, the chief means to live with the potentially despair-inducing logic of predestination was to work in a vocational calling, which would provide a means to acquire self-confidence and assurance of salvation.²¹

I differ from Weber in my contention that Reformation-era penitential anxiety extended beyond questions of whether the sinner was predestined for salvation in the afterlife. The narratives of penitence I will discuss in this study suggest that for people troubled by guilt and shame in Renaissance England, the most urgent question was not always “Am I among the elect?,” the question that Weber places at the heart of Protestant experience in the period. By setting penitential episodes in non-Christian worlds, imaginative writers set aside questions of election and reprobation in order to foreground other dimensions of penitential experience. These other dimensions include sin’s effects on personal identity (constraining a character into a static “deed’s creature” or, conversely, opening up new possibilities for changed action) and its effects on social and family relationships.

Even a penitent who feels assured of his election must still find a way to live with guilt during this life and mitigate the harm he has done to others. Vocational success and other signs of assurance may help a penitent to feel more secure about her prospects for divine salvation in the afterlife, but they cannot restore the relationships damaged by her actions, diminish the shame she feels before the eyes of others, or relieve her unhappiness

²⁰ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

about the kind of person she has become. Even if Sidney's Gynecia received a divine confirmation that the heavens were open to her after all (the kind of confirmation that Spenser's Redcrosse Knight receives from Una), she would still have to face the reality of her husband lying dead at her feet and the social processes of judgment and punishment that await her.

FROM SATISFACTION TO CONVERSION

The romances in this dissertation are each concerned with questions of penitential *initiative*, *sufficiency*, and *completion*: What can a penitent do in order to obtain forgiveness? How much action and suffering are enough? When is the penitential process over? We hear echoes of these questions in the penitent soliloquies of dramatic characters including Posthumus Leonatus in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, who asks the gods, "Is it enough I am sorry?," and Henry V, whose prayer for victory before the Battle of Agincourt is troubled by the fear that his numerous efforts to atone for his father's usurpation are "nothing worth." These characters want their penitence to count—to contribute in some meaningful way toward obtaining divine forgiveness—and they are troubled by the sense that their penitent practices and emotions have no such value. These literary expressions of anxiety register the persistence of a traditional conception of penitence that Protestant reformers had attempted to extinguish: the doctrine of satisfaction.²²

²² On the history of satisfaction in the late medieval and Reformation periods, see Heather Hirschfeld, *The Ends of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 16-38, and John Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction, 1400-1700," in *Retribution, Repentance and Reconciliation*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 106-18.

In brief, the doctrine of satisfaction holds that sin puts us in debt to God, and we can attain salvation only if we satisfy that debt—that is, if we do “enough” (*satis*) to compensate God—through works and emotional suffering.²³ This economic logic of penance as currency to pay the debt of sin dates back to the earliest forms of ecclesiastical penance in the first centuries of the Church, and it remained largely continuous in Western Christendom until the Reformation, even as other aspects of penance (such as the public or private nature of the ritual) shifted over time. When penance became formalized as a three-part sacrament in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, “satisfaction” named its third stage, after contrition and confession.

Protestant reformers objected to the satisfaction model of penitence because they held that no human efforts could ever influence God’s absolute power to determine his creatures’ salvation and damnation. In their view, only Christ’s sacrifice could satisfy mankind’s debt of sin, and it was sinful to presume that human efforts could do so. In place of the concept of satisfaction that had dominated medieval penance, reformers defined self-transformation, or *metanoia*, as the crucial element of penitential experience. But as Heather Hirschfeld persuasively argues in *The End of Satisfaction*, sixteenth-century literature bears witness to the enduring vitality of the concept of satisfaction. The penitential logic of debt and payback not only persisted in theological discussions of penitence but also migrated into

²³ The question of what constitutes “enough” was complicated in itself, even before Reformation-era challenges to the concept. Bossy writes that among lay believers in late medieval Catholicism, satisfaction was commonly understood as “recompense equal to the damage caused by the offense, a full and equal payment,” but in its strictest theological formulations, *satis* was conceived differently: not enough to fully repay the moral debt of sin, but enough to “prevent” God from “taking vengeance” on the sinner. Satisfaction conceived in this way is analogous to making a partial payment on a debt in order to show your good intentions and “in the hope that the creditor will remit the rest” (“Satisfaction,” 106-107).

other cultural discourses; Hirschfeld's analysis illuminates satisfaction as an underlying principle in dramatic representations of commercial exchange, revenge, and marriage.²⁴

The question of how this shift away from penitential models of satisfaction altered believers' emotional experience has animated a recent debate between Debora Shuger and James Simpson. Shuger's 2008 essay "The Reformation of Penance" takes a favorable view of reformers' movement from a principle of debt and payback toward one of parental forgiveness, in which divine judgment took the entire person—rather than that person's discrete sinful actions—as its objects.²⁵ On this account, the self is conceived as "simultaneously embodied in and anterior to its actions."²⁶ Shuger construes the Protestant notion of a fatherly God who judges the person rather than the acts as a source of comfort. But for Simpson, this Reformed understanding of penitence as encompassing the whole person (rather than her specific actions) is terrifying, inducing the same kinds of anxiety and helplessness he describes acutely in *Burning to Read*.²⁷ In Lutheran theology, Simpson writes,

the terrified Christian can have recourse to none of the obvious resources for placating an angry God: not the sacramental steps of penance, nor any work or deed that might mollify God. Above all, the Christian must have no confidence in any human resource whatsoever. The only available resource amid the terror is faith in God's own initiative.²⁸

In Simpson's account, far from promoting consolation, the reformation of penance engendered a widespread sense of helplessness to participate in one's own redemption.

²⁴ Hirschfeld, *Satisfaction*, 2.

²⁵ Debora Shuger, "The Reformation of Penance," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71.4 (2008): 557-571.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 563.

²⁷ James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

The popularizers of Protestant soteriology, and the medical men who infused Protestant penitential ideas into therapeutic practice, anticipated the terms of the debate between Shuger and Simpson. These writers perceived that the doctrines of predestination and faith-alone penitence could induce anxiety and despair, and they worked to explain how those same principles could become (unlikely) sources of consolation. Grace is a key player in these explanations: where all else fails, God's unconditional mercy washes over the sinner to compensate for all her insufficiencies, to wash her self clean, to heal that self's wounds (even the self-inflicted ones), and to lift that self above the past actions in which it had been mired. But the pattern of stories my dissertation describes—inconclusive penitential stories in non-Christian worlds—suggests that English subjects also felt some need to think and write about penitence without grace. Poets and dramatists were engaged in the same effort as the authors of Protestant consolatory texts: to acknowledge and confront the despair-inducing aspects of reformed penitential doctrine, and to find ways around them towards livable forms of penitence.

The Protestant ideal of repentance as a singular and definitive conversion of the self was based on the biblical transformation of Saul, a persecutor of Christians, into St. Paul. The narrative of Paul's conversion in Acts 9 established an ideal of conversion toward which Protestant penitents aspired:

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined around about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. (Acts 9:3-6).

Calvin refused to apply the story of Paul to his own life and represented his conversion instead as a gradual, incremental process.²⁹ Luther also refrained from comparing his own transformations to Paul's, and his only sermon devoted to the Damascus experience presented conversion as a lifelong ascetic discipline rather than a radical singular event.³⁰ Yet despite these leading reformers' reluctance to identify personally with Paul, his transformation was widely cited as an exemplar. As Brian Cummings writes, the Damascus experience constituted the "conversion of conversions," the "prototype" against which all other spiritual transformations could be measured. The centrality of this ideal became a troubling paradox of sixteenth-century Christian experience, because Paul's example was essentially impossible to emulate: "Every conversion is modeled on Paul's but none can stand the comparison."³¹ Paul's example inspired believers to desire "a religious experience as obvious, as unequivocal, as falling off a horse," but also ensured that their own conversion experiences would always feel insufficient by comparison: "The conversion of St. Paul is the conversion which occurs to no other sinner, which rebukes every other sinner."³²

REVISING *METANOIA*

Reformation-era controversies about how penitence should be undertaken often hinged on the definition and translation of a complex New Testament term, *metanoia* (*meta*, "change" or "after," + *nous*, mind), which is variously translated as conversion, repentance,

²⁹ Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 370.

³⁰ Karl Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), xxi.

³¹ Cummings, *Grammar and Grace*, 370.

³² *Ibid.*, 371.

change of mind, afterthought, or retrospection. In two frequently cited moments from the Book of Matthew, John the Baptist and Jesus urge believers to change their lives:

“And in those days cometh John the Baptist preaching in the desert of Judea. And saying: do penance (*metanoiete*): for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 3:1-2)

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say: Do penance (*metanoiete*), for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 4:17)

What must Christians do to prepare for the kingdom of heaven? Does the injunction *metanoiete* even ask us to *act* in any ordinary sense of the term, or is *metanoia* an experience that only God can initiate? In other words, can we “do” penitence, or can we only suffer it passively? In the early years of the Reformation, these questions animated heated debates among humanists including Lorenzo Valla, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, Thomas More, and William Tyndale.

Following St. Jerome’s Vulgate Bible, which translated *metanoiete* as *poenitentiam agite*, Catholic commentators interpreted the commandment as “do penance.” This command thus entailed a series of practical steps that the subject could voluntarily undertake: punish yourself; submit yourself to penitential discipline and affliction within this life in order to pay the debt of sin to God and reduce the suffering you will owe in purgatory. In this model, sin is a debt, and we pay for it in the currency of suffering.³³

³³ Throughout this study, I will resist characterizing this logic of debt and payback as a shallow, materialistic approach to penitence. Modern scholars tend to reproduce Reformation-era Protestant attitudes, perhaps unconsciously, when we refer to Catholic traditions of satisfaction; we write that subjects could “merely,” “simply,” or “just” pay off the debt, as if to say that they are taking the easy way out, not taking sin and moral responsibility seriously enough. But as I will show, both sides of this debate in the period took penitence extremely seriously, and each accused the other of being too soft on sin; this accusation underlies Thomas More’s conflict with William Tyndale over the legitimacy of penance as a sacrament. Satisfaction had its debased and shallow forms, as did faith-alone

For Luther, Calvin, and the writers of Protestant practical divinity known as “conscience literature,” *metanoiēte* means “repent,” not “do penance.” In the preface to his 1534 New Testament, William Tyndale wrote: “Concerning this word repentance, or (as they used) penance...the Greek in the New Testament hath perpetually *metaneo*—to turn in the heart and mind, and to come to the right knowledge, and to a man’s right wit again.”³⁴

Erasmus interpreted the evangelist’s command as an injunction to think again, to look back critically on our past actions. In his 1516 Latin edition of the New Testament, Erasmus rendered *metanoiēte* as *poeniteat vos* (be penitent, be contrite). But when he re-issued the text in 1527, he rendered the term instead as *resipiscite* (change your mind, recover your senses).³⁵ The transformative effects that followed from Erasmus’s redefinitions of *metanoia*—his changes of mind about the concept of changing one’s mind—cannot be overstated. Erasmus himself respected the sacrament of penance and regarded auricular confession as a valuable source of guidance and consolation for troubled Christians. His *Lytle Treatise on Confession* (1524, translated by John Bydell in 1535) takes a moderate position within contemporary debates between defenders of sacramental penance, who believed that Jesus had authorized priests to ritually absolve sin by conferring upon his apostles the “power of the keys” to bind and loose sinful souls, and opponents of the sacrament, who denied that priestly absolution and private confession were sanctioned by scripture. Erasmus

penitence. But Catholics who undertook practices of penitential discipline (such as prayer, fasting, physical mortification, pilgrimage, and self-sacrifice) would hardly have regarded these practices as trivial matters or as shortcuts past the inner processes of self-reflection and personal transformation that God requires.

³⁴ “W.T. Unto the Reader,” *Tyndale’s New Testament*, ed. David Daniell (Yale University Press, 1989), 9. Tyndale approvingly cites Erasmus: “*resipisco* I come to myself or to my right mind again.”

³⁵ King’oo 85. See also Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 72-76, and Murray, *Poetics of Conversion*, 6-7.

embraces confession primarily because he believes it is effective at discouraging sin and providing consolation to troubled believers; for him, this practical value makes sacramental penance worth preserving and defending even if its scriptural basis is questionable. But despite Erasmus's respect for traditional penance, his interpretive glosses on *metanoia* laid the foundation for attacks on the sacrament by Luther and other reformers.

Etymologically, *metanoia* designates a conversion of the mind, but English Protestants generally expand it to refer to a conversion of the entire self. This transformation, they insist, must be comprehensive: a metamorphosis that leaves no trace of one's former identity. Yet, crucially, we cannot finish this transformation. Moreover, we cannot even initiate it—only God can do so. Thus, when the evangelist says “metanoiete,” he is telling us to cultivate feelings of remorse (rather than obscuring or evading these feelings), to prepare ourselves for God's intervention and become receptive to it (a practice typically expressed with metaphors of tilling soil), and to wait, pray, and hope that God will afflict us with repentance. These verbs—cultivate, prepare, wait, and so on—represent Protestant treatises' most commonly repeated practical prescriptions for repentance. But in a sense, such active verbs cannot be consistent with Protestant ideals of penitence, which demand a radical emptying of the self and its capacity for action. To really repent is to give ourselves over into God's hands, becoming utterly passive, abject, and empty in order that we may be regenerated.

CONSCIENCE LITERATURE

Sixteenth-century reformations of penitential doctrine were bound up with practices of reading, writing, and interpretation. The literary underpinnings of the reformation of penance extended beyond scholarly disputes among educated commentators like Erasmus, Luther, Tyndale and More. Exemplary stories—disseminated through sermons, plays, visual media like household wall hangings, popular songs, and low-cost blackletter tracts and chapbooks—gave shape to penitential experience for Christians at all levels of social rank and literacy.³⁶ The parable of the prodigal son assured believers that God, like a merciful and forgiving father, would welcome them home with open arms if they only turned back towards him.³⁷ The story of Judas, who hanged himself in despair for betraying Christ, served as a cautionary tale urging troubled believers not to give up hope for divine mercy even when their penitential suffering felt unbearable.³⁸

Popular understanding of penitence in the English Renaissance was also shaped by a body of practical divinity known as “conscience literature,” a genre of practical guides to penitence—including sermons, encyclopedic treatises, devotional handbooks, and anatomies of the passions—that proliferated in England during the late sixteenth and seventeenth

³⁶ On the circulation and material production of Christian writing for popular audiences, see Walsham, *Providence*, 32-64, and Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*.

³⁷ Instances of the prodigal son as an example in conscience literature include Dyke (81) and Est (37-38). The popularity of the prodigal son story extended well beyond its frequent appearance in sermons and devotional writing: it was featured in songs, woodcut prints, and wall hangings and was also a classic theme of Tudor moral interludes. On the popular circulation of this story, see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, 119-120 and 202-205.

³⁸ On Judas, see, for instance, the “Homily on Repentance”; Henry Smith, “The Christian’s Practice,” 391-396; and Immanuel Bourne, *Anatomie of Conscience* (1623), 17. The Huguenot Augustin Marlorat’s *Sermon on Repentance*, translated by Thomas Tymme, offers the most thorough account I have yet encountered of why the deeply remorseful Judas should be regarded as an example of “false repentance” (686-687).

centuries.³⁹ Conscience literature did polemical work, differentiating Protestant penitential practices from Catholic traditions. Penitential treatises often satirize the logic of indulgences and purgatory, and they offer reinterpretations of traditional terms like “satisfaction.” But they also provided practical guidance about what to do in the face of guilt and shame, how to interpret one’s own emotional states, how to pray, and how to seek forgiveness. The wide circulation of conscience literature among both clergy and lay readers suggests that in the generations following the reformation of penance, English believers still felt some need for the consolation and ritual structure that sacramental penance had once provided.

The archive of conscience literature illuminates the complex and sometimes internally contradictory texture of Protestant penitential discourse in the period. Writers of practical divinity struggle to resolve, or at least to help believers to work around, theological paradoxes including the following: 1) Repentance is defined as a radical, once-and-for-all conversion, but also as a lifelong, continuous process. 2) Repentance demands that a sinner utterly destroy his old, sinful self, yet this total destruction and renewal is impossible. 3) Reformed theology insists that repentance cannot earn or merit God’s forgiveness, but commentators often adopt a conditional “if/then” mindset to suggest that the sinner’s penitence can in fact influence God’s decision.

Writers of practical divinity pursued two somewhat contradictory rhetorical goals: to shake complacent or “secure” hearts into a painful sense of their own unforgivable sinfulness, and to mitigate the rigor of penitence by helping readers cultivate the sense of assurance and grace necessary to prevent despair. Samuel Hieron’s devotional handbook, *A*

³⁹ Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 31.

Help Unto Devotion, instructs penitents to pray for a moderate balance between these extreme poles of penitential affect: “Let the apprehension of my sin be tempered with a comfortable application of thy mercy, that I may hold an even course betwixt fearless security and faithless despair.”⁴⁰ This made for a sense of strain and contradiction as writers sought to address two kinds of readers, those who were overly secure and those who were overly penitent. Some divines appeared to anticipate that their own rhetoric might drive readers to despair. Arthur Dent’s popular *Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* opens by urging the reader not to cast the book away after reading the first few pages: “Be not discouraged therefore at the harshness of the beginning...for this dialogue hath in it, not the nature of a Tragedy, which is begun with joy, and ended with sorrow; but a Comedy, which is begun with sorrow, and ended with joy.”⁴¹

Conscience literature was written by Church of England clergymen across a variety of doctrinal positions, from the Elizabethan nonconformist Arthur Dent (whose 1581 *Sermon on Repentance* was reprinted 22 times) to the Jacobean high clericalist Immanuel Bourne. These writers sometimes differ in their prescriptions for the practice of repentance; for example, Richard Stock’s 1610 treatise recommends that penitents put on “black mourning weed” and practice outward humiliation and bodily discipline, while most other sermons recommend inward humiliation only, citing the biblical injunction to “rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2.13).⁴² Despite these differences, most Protestant commentators share the conviction that true repentance is defined first and foremost as a

⁴⁰ Hieron, *A Help Unto Devotion* (London, 1608), 231.

⁴¹ Arthur Dent, *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* (London, 1601), 1.

⁴² Stock, *Doctrine and use of repentance* (London, 1610), 65-66.

radical conversion of the self: *metanoia*, which some treatises render in English as “transmentation” or “new brayning.”⁴³

Such total conversion distinguishes the exemplary, true repentance of biblical exemplars like David and Peter from the failed penitence of Judas and Saul. This radical transformation could be initiated only by God’s grace, not by the sinner’s own agency, and it would produce an “alteration” so absolute that commentators often adopt the language of marvelous metamorphosis to describe it. “So great is the change,” wrote Daniel Dyke, “that not only our selves, but others also may...marvel at it,” as they might wonder at the “change of a stone into flesh.”⁴⁴ But because such total transformation is seldom achieved in human experience, many treatises temper this idealized vision with an admission that residual characteristics of the sinful “old man” remain within each sinner even after he has experienced conversion into a “new man.”

The archive of conscience literature overlaps with that of the anatomy of passions: medical treatises that sought to classify emotions, diagnose pathological “perturbations,” and prescribe remedies. Many of these texts, including anatomies of melancholy by Richard Burton (1621) and Timothy Bright (1586), include extensive discussions of guilt and shame, exhortations against despair, and spiritual consolations for readers who feel either indifferent to penitential feeling or excessively afflicted by it. This overlap indicates that the remorse of

⁴³ Daniel Dyke, *Treatise of Repentance* (London, 1616), 17: “But these men sorrow not aright, because they sorrow not as the Corinthians did unto a *transmentation*, unto a change of their thoughts and purposes from evill to good.” Dyke appears to have coined this Anglicized form of *metanoia*, which antedates the OED’s earliest instance of “transmentation” by thirty years. “New brayning,” another creative attempt to render *metanoia* in English, appears in a mid-seventeenth-century sermon by Thomas Reeve: “μετάνοια, a new brayning, or a transmentation” (*God’s plea for Nineveh* [London, 1657], 63).

⁴⁴ Dyke, *A Treatise of Repentance*, 108.

conscience was regarded as both a medical and a spiritual affliction. According to Bright, Burton, and William Perkins, the physical and affective symptoms of penitence were practically indistinguishable from those of melancholy. The chief distinction between the two lay in their cure: while melancholy could be cured by “physic” (medical remedies like diet, exercise, bloodletting, and purgation), the torments of conscience could only be resolved by Christian grace and spiritual consolation.⁴⁵

Bright’s career illustrates the close convergence of medical and spiritual discourses in the period: he worked as a physician until 1590, when he became a clergyman. His sense of Protestant identity was likely solidified by the trauma of witnessing the Catholic massacre of Huguenots during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572. Bright, who was roughly twenty years old at the time, took refuge at the home of Sir Francis Walsingham with other English Protestants including a young Sir Philip Sidney (to whom Bright would later dedicate a medical treatise in 1584). Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) promises “phisike cure” to those suffering from melancholy and “spiritual consolation” to readers with afflicted consciences.⁴⁶ This treatise takes the form of a self-help book: it is composed in the second person, addressed to the author’s “Melancholike Friend, M,” who suffers from both melancholy humors and guilt of conscience. These conditions are not the same, but Bright claims that a melancholic disposition makes people more than usually sensitive to the

⁴⁵ See Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London, 1586), 189, and Robert Burton, *The Anatomie of Melancholie* (London, 1621), 405 and 413.

⁴⁶ *A Treatise of Melancholie. Containing the causes thereof, & reasons of the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies: with the phisicke cure, and spirituall consolation for such as haue thereto adioyned an afflicted conscience.* London, 1586.

affliction of conscience: “upon you the cross falleth more heavily, in so much as you are under the disadvantage of the melancholic complexion” (192).

Bright considers the “affliction of conscience” to be the most debilitating sickness we can suffer, because while other “calamities” only hurt the body, guilt affects “the soul, which carieth the whole into societie of the same miserie” (184). Unlike melancholy, guilt cannot be cured by medicine or diet: “Here no medicine, no purgation, no cordial” can “assure the afflicted soule and trembling heart, now panting under the terrors of God” (189). Bright tries to assure him using the standard rhetoric of practical divinity: M feels the wrath of God heavily now, but Bright assures him that “this is a fatherly frowning only for a time, to correct that in you which is to be reformed” (191).

Bright’s instructions to M are consistent with practical divines’ efforts to provide guidance for self-examination: these writers instructed readers in how to properly interpret their own passions. Since each individual’s election was unknowable, writers urged believers to read their own bodily and affective experiences for signs of assurance. Consolatory treatises by Bright, Greenham, Dent, and Perkins urge penitents to read against the grain of their own suffering—to interpret even their worst moments of doubt, shame, and inner torment as “sensible” testimony of God’s favor, “earnest of regeneration.” Even an *absence* of penitent feeling could be construed favorably: according to Robert Burton, feeling grieved about your own lack of remorse “is grace itself.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Burton, *Anatomie*, 415. “A desire to repent is repentance itself, though not in nature, yet in God’s acceptance,” Burton writes. “Canst thou grieve thou dost not grieve? I conclude, to feel in ourselves the want of grace, and to be grieved for it, is grace itself.”

ROMANCE

Gynecia's crisis of conscience is a tragic scene. Sidney signals its tragic quality explicitly as Gynecia cries out to her absent beloved, "there is a fair stage prepared for thee, to see the tragical end of thy hated lover."⁴⁸ Yet it takes place within a literary romance, a mode characterized by improbable, wondrous second chances, family reconciliations, and the restoration of what seemed to be lost forever. This scene in particular includes several familiar romance devices, including a trick of mistaken identities, the setting of a secluded cave in the forest, and a cup of potion that produces marvelous, if not magical, effects.⁴⁹ It also marks a moment of deferral, a narrative strategy characteristic of the romance mode. Sidney leads readers to expect a climactic confrontation between husband and wife in this scene, only to defer that confrontation and put one of his characters on ice until the fiction's final pages—a strategy that Shakespeare also employs in *The Winter's Tale*. He defers a resolution to Gynecia's suffering, which never gets fully resolved, as I will show in Chapter One.

⁴⁸ *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, 730.

⁴⁹ Most accounts of literary romance describe it as an un-realistic mode with "fairy-tale" qualities, but there is no clear consensus on whether magic constitutes a distinguishing feature of this mode. Barbara Fuchs lists "the marvelous" as one of the defining characteristics of literary romance (9), but Helen Cooper argues that English romance tends to raise readers' expectations for magical events only to disappoint those expectations and divert readers' wonder elsewhere (*The English Romance in Time*, 138). Cooper develops this argument throughout her third chapter, "Magic That Doesn't Work." Sidney raises the possibility that Gynecia's sleeping potion is magical, but he surrounds that possibility with qualifiers and presents it as mere speculation: the drink is "neither (as Gynecia first imagined) a love-potion nor (as it was after thought) a deadly poison, but a drink made by notable art and, as it was thought, not without natural magic" (845).

By drawing together a prose romance, an epic poem, and a tragicomic play, I seek to theorize the cultural work of “romance,” the notoriously puzzling and generative literary category to which these three works belong. Romance is a “fairy-tale” mode that favors exotic locations, archaic settings, and improbable, often magical events. These elements might lead romance to be perceived as an idle, escapist mode; contemporary moralists like Juan Luis Vives and Roger Ascham condemned literary romances for this reason among others. But Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare use romance’s elements of fantasy and hyperbole in order to engage productively with real-world controversies.⁵⁰ They use imaginary non-Christian settings to stage thought experiments that challenge and reconfigure their culture’s dominant ideas of penitence.

Romance is an errant, wandering mode. It calls us to linger in the here and now, in the “meanwhile,” where adventures and experience exfoliate on all sides, diverging endlessly from the main storyline, the heroic quest. It offers us sensory delights by the roadside, in the bower, the enclosed glade, the shepherds’ feast. It takes us under the sea and onto the moon, into enchanted palaces full of illusions, houses of discipline where we are restored to our better selves, halls of mirrors that reveal our internal vices and virtues. In romance we encounter endless variations of potential selves, from the ideal to the horrible, from dreams to nightmares. We find creatures mutilated, made exemplary, defiled, scattered in pieces, discarded. The byways of romance are littered with these dark fantasies of punishment and

⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Ganteau writes that the romance mode characteristically “eschews verisimilitude” and is associated with “escapism” and “magic,” but it is precisely this non-realistic quality that enables romance writers to explore questions that “remain out of the reach of realistic narrative.” (“Fantastic, but Truthful: The Ethics of Romance,” *Cambridge Quarterly* 32.3 [2003], 227-8).

shame, with scenes of violent constraint and rapture, women carried off by monsters and monstrous men, women dismembered and frozen and humiliated by misogyny, men disrobed and shorn, children abandoned to grow up half-wild in the forest. We find subjects disguised, disfigured, cloned, remade, annihilated, magnified and diminished, flanked by avatars of their own qualities or of the conventions within which they live (as Mirabella by Scorn and Disdain, or Amoret by Cruelty and Despight).

Writers of practical divinity insist on the power of Christian grace to comfort the afflicted and resolve penitential suffering, but these fictions explore what it feels like to live without that source of resolution. In an end-oriented culture that emphasized the conversion of suffering into a net positive, suffering as means to (or sign of) a salvific end, the structural deferrals of romance emerged as a way for poets to restore readers' attention to "the meantime"—to the continuous struggle of penitence within this world, as distinct from the divine reckoning of salvation and damnation in the next.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

Chapter One, " 'To think with pain': Revision and Repentance in Sidney's *Arcadias*," explores Sir Philip Sidney's proliferating variations on the theme of penitential frustration across his two pastoral prose romances: the *Old Arcadia*, circulated in manuscript in 1580, and the ambitious expansion known as the *New Arcadia*, which Sidney left unfinished when he died at age 32. I read Sidney's fictions as a testing ground for the notion that guilt and shame can catalyze moral reform. In his *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney had affirmed the transformative potential of these emotions, citing a biblical anecdote in which the prophet

Nathan moves David to reform by telling a parable that reflects the king's transgressions "as in a glass." But the *New Arcadia*, I argue, questions the efficacy of such literary rebukes and the didactic value of penitential emotion itself. This romance narrates numerous failed opportunities for reform: the Arcadians most in need of correction misinterpret potentially instructive "glasses," while deeply penitent characters feel more tortured than edified by self-condemnation.

This chapter revises an existing critical understanding of Sidney as a staunch Protestant moralist who uses his fiction to elicit repentance in readers. I suggest that rather than upholding any specific doctrine, Sidney uses the experimental "staging area" of romance to imagine how penitence might unfold outside of Christian dispensations. Sidney's interest in the affective and lived problems of penitential doctrine, I argue, helps to account for the formal patterns of dilation and impasse that become an increasingly prominent feature of his style in the *New Arcadia*.

Chapter Two, "The Endless Work of Penitence in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*," reads the punishment of Mirabella in Book Six of Spenser's epic as a revision of the Protestant penitential models of despair and renewal that Spenser allegorizes in Book One. The discipline and healing of the Redcrosse Knight in Spenser's House of Holiness sets up the expectation that characters can achieve definitive self-transformation through penitential discipline, but Mirabella's story undermines this expectation. Despite the poet's promise to reveal how she "did acquite" herself of her crime, and Mirabella's own claim that she has already "repayd" her crime "with interest," her penance has no foreseeable endpoint. Although Mirabella's penance fails to lead to the "acquittal" that the poet repeatedly

promises and then defers, it does release her from the fate of becoming permanently defined by her past transgressions.

Chapter Three, “‘Almost a miracle’: The ends of penitence in *The Winter’s Tale*,” argues that *The Winter’s Tale* imagines a version of redemption in which personal reconciliation matters more to the penitent than divine absolution, and in which humans, not deities, facilitate the penitent’s transformation and forgiveness. Rather than nostalgically harkening to the abolished practice of sacramental penance, or affirming a reformed view of repentance as an interior transformation that only God can initiate, Shakespeare departs from both confessional models. He asks what kinds of redemption become possible in a world where the gods’ involvement in human affairs is difficult to verify—a world where, in the words of the Bohemian rogue Autolycus, the gods have apparently left humans to “do anything extempore.”

This chapter reconsiders Shakespeare’s relationship to Jacobean debates about drama’s affective and didactic power. Apologists like Thomas Heywood argued that plays could incite moral reform by arousing shame and guilt in the audience, but *The Winter’s Tale* challenges contemporary affirmations of the instructive value of remorse. Paulina deepens Leontes’ penitence to a level that other characters find excessive: she deceives him about his wife’s death, torments him with painful reminders of his actions for sixteen years. I argue that rather than embracing the logic of Heywood’s *Apology* and aspiring to elicit remorse in his own audiences, Shakespeare reveals that the practice of “attacking” another person’s conscience can do more harm than good. Such forceful intrusions may be well-intentioned,

but Shakespeare shows that they can also devolve into self-interested efforts to punish and exact vengeance on the offender, rather than eliciting salutary reform.

Chapter 1: Repentance and Revision in Sidney's *Arcadia*

INTRODUCTION

Sir Philip Sidney is often characterized as an exemplary, heroic figure. The language of achievement and mastery is widespread in critical discussions of this author, even among detractors who find his writing distastefully moralistic or superficial. Yet Sidney appears to have regarded his own work with a keen eye for its failures. In 1580, when he presented the manuscript of his prose romance *Arcadia* to his sister Mary, Sidney attached a self-deprecating preface asking her to pardon the work's many "deformities" and to "love the writer" in spite of them (57).⁵¹ Like Shakespeare's Prospero, who asks the audience to applaud his performance "as you from crimes would pardoned be," Sidney frames this plea for the reader's indulgence in Christian penitential vocabulary: he speaks of error, pardon, blame, and deformity, and calls himself an offender in need of sanctuary. In addition to disparaging his book as a trifling toy unworthy of serious consideration, Sidney implicitly describes it as an offense for which he seeks forgiveness.

We could dismiss these disclaimers as conventional or playful, unreliable indicators of Sidney's true assessment of his work. But in this chapter, I argue that Sidney's fiction

⁵¹ "To my dear lady and sister, the Countess of Pembroke." *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (London: Penguin, 1977), 57. All citations to *Arcadia* refer to Evans' edition, which is based on the 1593 composite text of Sidney's revised romance. This composite includes William Alexander's supplementary chapters to Book Three, which conclude the episode of civil war that Sidney had left unfinished at his death in 1586. It also includes modified versions of Books Four and Five of the *Old Arcadia*. For an overview of the complex textual history of Sidney's *Arcadias*, see Regina Schneider, *Sidney's (Re)Writing of the "Arcadia"* (New York: AMS Press, 2008), which includes a chart summarizing distinctions between the 1580, 1590, and 1593 editions (34-35).

reveals an abiding interest in the dynamics of negative self-perception—what he variously calls “self-accusing,” “self-punishing,” and “self-detestation.” The persistence of this topic invites us to attend seriously to the preface’s suggestions of anxiety about writing, and to ask why Sidney conjoins that anxiety with penitential concerns: guilt, shame, the desire for forgiveness, and the effort to transform oneself for the better.

When Sidney undertook an ambitious revision and expansion of *Arcadia* in the early 1580’s, he amplified his attention to the very feeling of self-laceration hinted in the original preface and shifted that feeling into the narrative, into the psychological experience of his characters. Here is Musidorus, one of *Arcadia*’s central heroes, composing an apology after he offends his beloved Pamela:

...at last he yielded, since he was banished her presence, to seek some means by writing to show his sorrow and testify his repentance... But never pen did more quakingly perform his office; never was paper more double-moistened with ink and tears; never words more slowly married together, and never the Muses more tired than now with changes and re-changes of his devices; fearing how to end before he had resolved how to begin, mistrusting each word, condemning each sentence. This word was not significant; that word was too plain: this would not be conceived; the other would be ill-conceived: here sorrow was not enough expressed; there he seemed too much for his own sake to be sorry: this sentence rather showed art than passion; that sentence rather foolishly passionate than forcibly moving.

At last, marring with mending and putting out better than he left, he made an end of it and being ended, was divers times ready to tear it, till his reason assuring him the more he studied the worse it grew, he folded it up, devoutly invoking good acceptance unto it... (437)

In the midst of a vast epic that expands its scope to include civil war, Sidney here offers a surprisingly intimate view of a man struggling to write—specifically, to express repentance. In a romance that often alienates modern readers, this passage touches a nerve. We experience Sidney not as a glittering rhetorical performer or a methodical moral teacher, but

in Virginia Woolf's words, as "a real man trying to speak privately about something that is close to his heart."⁵²

Musidorus's apology scene introduces a specifically penitential kind of retrospection: he has transgressed and wants to be forgiven, but his burden is to persuade the reader that he believes himself utterly unworthy of forgiveness. The result can only be a piece of self-sabotaging rhetoric that, like Sidney's own *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet sequence, strains in two incompatible directions: suing for grace and insisting that the speaker is unworthy of it.

Musidorus's fear that he cannot finish his work and that his reader will not be moved by it resonates with the self-disparaging tone of Sidney's earlier preface, but it represents a stark departure from Sidney's confident assertions of poetic force in the *Defence of Poesy* (1581). In the *Defence*, Sidney cites the biblical prophet Nathan, who reforms King David by telling him a parable that reflects the king's own sins "as in a glass," as a model for poets who seek to reform readers by stirring them to repent.⁵³ Like the prophets and the gospel itself, Sidney implies, secular poets can catalyze personal transformation by telling stories that elicit readers' guilt and shame.⁵⁴ The *Defence* thus casts the writer as a disciplinarian who

⁵² Virginia Woolf, "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia," *The Common Reader: the Second Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 34. Woolf locates Sidney's aesthetic value in his realistic depictions of emotional struggle, which she believes must be based on personal experience: "there are moments where Sidney stopped and thought, like any other novelist, what a real man or woman in this particular situation would say; where his own emotions come suddenly to the surface and light up the vague pastoral landscape with an incongruous glare" (44). We witness "Sidney's own anger... and his pain. And then the novelist Sidney suddenly opens his eyes."

⁵³ "The Defence of Poesy," in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford University Press, 2002), 228.

⁵⁴ Robert Stillman claims that Sidney took *metanoia*, a Greek term typically translated as conversion or repentance, as his model for the "transforming work of the fiction-maker" ("I am not I": Philip Sidney and the Energy of Fiction," *Sidney Journal* 30.1 [2012], 5).

works to elicit repentance in others, but as he narrates Musidorus's struggle in the *New Arcadia*, Sidney presents a writer *as* penitent: a vulnerable, anxious subject whose efforts are both motivated and constrained by remorse.

These two author figures, Nathan and Musidorus, overlap with critical characterizations of Sidney as masterful or overwhelmed. Scholars who address penitential themes in Sidney's creative work tend to read Sidney as a moralist who entraps readers into repentance, leading us to sympathize with sinful characters in order to teach us a lesson, as Nathan did for David.⁵⁵ This view supports the broader assumption that Sidney's creative work successfully carries out the aims of his *Defence*—that Sidney was able to “fashion a stable image of the heroic life” and communicate it with exemplary clarity and force.⁵⁶ But Musidorus's scene of writing reinforces a second familiar narrative of Sidney as a chronically disappointed young man, who gave voice to personal frustrations by writing a fiction that dwells on themes of disruption, incompleteness, failure, and “gaps between intention and result.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See Anne Astell, “Sidney's Didactic Method in the *Old Arcadia*,” *Studies in English Literature* 24.1 (1984), 39-51; Alan Sinfield, “Sidney and Astrophil,” *Studies in English Literature* 20 (1980), 25-41; and Andrew Weiner, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism: A Study of Contexts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978).

⁵⁶ I quote William Craft, who provides an overview of the long-standing conflict between triumphant and tragic perceptions of Sidney: *The Labyrinth of Desire* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1994), 5.

⁵⁷ Gavin Alexander, “Sidney's Interruptions,” *Studies in Philology* 98.2 (Spring 2001), 197. The two most influential accounts of Sidney's fiction as shaped by personal and professional frustration are Richard McCoy, *Rebellion in Arcadia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), and Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). My argument follows McCoy and Helgerson in asserting that Sidney loses control of his materials while composing the *New Arcadia*—that the revision takes on a life of its own, in spite of its maker's commitment to didactic writing, and frustrates Sidney's intentions to write a fiction that would successfully exemplify the principles of the *Defence*.

This chapter seeks an alternative to these opposed poles. I read the *New Arcadia* as neither a triumphant fulfillment of the *Defence's* didactic principles nor an expression of individual anxiety, but as an engagement with questions that preoccupied Sidney's contemporaries after the Church of England's mid-sixteenth century Reformation of sacramental penance. In his representations of struggling characters like Musidorus, Sidney confronts the defining questions of personal initiative, sufficiency, and completion that pervaded sixteenth-century penitential discourse: How can I know when I have suffered enough? Will this suffering transform me for the better? When is penitence over, and what happens afterward?

This chapter thus situates Sidney within the context of late sixteenth-century Protestant conversations about penitence, but I do not interpret Sidney's fictions as instances of a "Protestant poetic" or as affirmations of Reformed doctrines.⁵⁸ Indeed, by highlighting episodes of failed and incomplete penitential transformation within the *New*

Unlike McCoy and Helgerson, I claim that frustration is not just a psychological diagnosis we can apply to Sidney as an individual, but a central part of his fiction's subject matter that is informed by his critical engagement with Protestant discourses of penitence.

⁵⁸ The most influential studies of Sidney's poetry and fiction as shaped by Calvinist convictions include Andrew Weiner, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism: A Study of Contexts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978); Alan Sinfield, "Sidney and Astrophil," *Studies in English Literature* 20 (1980), 25-41; Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 181-214; and Franco Marenco, "The Double Plot in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*," *MLR* 64.2 (April 1969): 248-63. Robert Stillman, in *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), persuasively challenges these accounts and demonstrates Sidney's affiliation with the "Philippists," a community of continental European Protestants influenced by Philip Melancthon, who sought to transcend denominational conflicts and who embraced a more moderate position on personal agency and free will than Calvinists. For a recent overview of critical debates about Sidney's confessional allegiance, see Stillman, "Philip Sidney and the Catholics: the Turn from Confessionalism in Early Modern Studies," *Modern Philology* 112.1 (2014): 97-129.

Arcadia, I hope to challenge critical accounts of Sidney as a staunch Protestant moralist who aspires to elicit repentance in his own readers as Nathan did for David. I suggest that rather than upholding any specific doctrine, Sidney uses the experimental “staging area” of romance (in Gordon Teskey and George Logan’s words) to imagine how penitence might unfold outside of Christian dispensations.⁵⁹ He also takes up the tropes of penitential discourse to think through secular affective struggles, including erotic frustration and authorial anxiety—struggles that dovetail in Musidorus’s scene of writing.

Sidney’s representations of penitence take up the images and vocabulary of contemporary treatises by clergymen and anatomists of the passions, who worked to popularize Calvinist doctrines of penitence and provide practical guidance to readers who struggled with the harsh extremity of those doctrines. These commentators interpret penitential suffering productively, figuring it as a medical treatment or pathway to a new, purified life. Sidney’s fiction revises such progressive models by structuring penitential episodes according to the characteristic patterns of romance: digressive and often inconclusive, like the *New Arcadia* itself. These formal characteristics of Sidney’s revision work in tension with his aspiration toward increased moral clarity. Many critics understand the *New Arcadia* as something of a penitential effort in itself, an attempt to remake the original version and redeem its shortcomings: Sidney aimed to turn a trifle into an epic, a tale of morally ambiguous characters into an encyclopedic gallery of clearly delineated heroes and villains. This clarifying impulse is most evident in Sidney’s choice to purify his two central heroes by removing two of the original fiction’s most controversial episodes: Pyrocles’ sex

⁵⁹ On romance as an intrinsically experimental mode, see *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. Gordon Teskey and George Logan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 7.

scene with Philoclea and Musidorus's attempt to rape Pamela.⁶⁰ But like the Protestant penitential ideal of *metanoia*, defined as the conversion of the sinful old man into a regenerate new man, this utter transformation proved unattainable: Sidney's new book remains shadowed by the ambiguities of the old.

POETIC REBUKE

Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* describes emotions as gateways for moral instruction: the poet inspires readers' attention and desire to learn by offering "familiar," entertaining tales with "words set in delightful proportion," and he elicits readers' self-criticism and reform by offering an incriminating "glass" that reveals their faults. Sidney presents the Old Testament prophet Nathan as a model for this second, less widely discussed strategy, which I call his *poetic of rebuke*. To persuade King David to end his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, Nathan tells a parable of a rich man stealing a poor man's only lamb. Sidney writes that the tale immediately makes David "as in a glass see his own filthiness." Identification with the fictional thief moves David to repent and change his life, "as that heavenly psalm of mercy [the penitential Psalm 51] testifieth."

Sidney's image of the story as a transformative looking glass takes up a long-standing Christian practice of describing sacred texts as mirrors for self-examination. As Anne Lake Prescott has demonstrated, commentators as early as the Church fathers Athanasius and Basil referred to the psalms as "glasses" for the reader's conscience, and Sidney would likely

⁶⁰ On Sidney's efforts to purify the princes and enforce more rigid moral divisions between the characters, see Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 197-199.

have encountered this comparison in the prefaces to his family's psalter.⁶¹ In his prologue to a psalter translated into English by John Florio in 1571, John Calvin called the Psalms a glass that reveals an "image" of each man's fears, sorrows, and weaknesses, "lyvely set out before our eyes." According to Calvin, the psalms "do call or draw every one of us to the peculiar examination of himself" so that we cannot avoid acknowledging our "infirmities."⁶²

The fantasy underlying Sidney's account of David's transformation—and of the *Defence* as a whole—is that poets have the power to reliably control and manipulate readers' emotions toward the desired didactic end. But this fantasy strains against the difficulties of reading known to any writer or teacher of literature: the reader may simply miss the point, or experience a different emotional response than the writer meant to produce, and even the correct emotional response may well fail to motivate "right acting" in practice. (This same possibility troubles another of Sidney's supposedly exemplary instances of artistic force in the *Defence*: the story of Alexander Phereus, the tyrant who was so moved by a tragic play that he left the theatre in tears. Sidney cites this classical anecdote as evidence of drama's power to soften hard hearts, but it could just as well be adduced as evidence for the *inefficacy* of didactic art; the tragedy moves Phereus, but not in a way that leads him to change his tyrannical behavior.) Rather than acknowledging these possibilities, Sidney effaces them by redacting his biblical source text. His summary conspicuously excludes the fact that in 2 Samuel 12, David initially misinterprets the story and has to have it explained to him. Failing

⁶¹ Anne Lake Prescott, "King David as 'Right Poet': Sidney and the Psalmist," *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989): 131-151.

⁶² John Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and Others. With M. John Calvins Commentaries*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1571), 1.

to recognize the rich man as a reflection of himself, David vows to seek out and punish him; he repents only after Nathan clarifies the story's figurative meaning, saying "Thou art the man" and delivering a lengthy admonition from God.

By citing David's conversion in the *Defence*, Sidney participates in a popular tradition of treating the psalmist as a model of sincere remorse and thorough amendment of life. The Elizabethan Homily on Repentance, which cites Nathan's rebuke to illustrate the redemptive power of scripture, also redacts the biblical story by omitting David's initial misinterpretation. According to the Homily, the process of repentance begins with heartfelt contrition, but in order to feel this contrition, we must first read the scriptures,

which most liuely do paint out before our eyes... the enormitie of our sinfull life. For vnlesse wee haue a thorow feeling of our sinnes, how can it bee that wee should earnestly bee sorie for them? Afore Dauid did heare the worde of the Lord by the mouth of the Prophet Nathan, what heauinesse I pray you was in him for the adulterie and the murder that hee had committed?⁶³

The Homily attributes transformative value to preaching and scripture, and Sidney's citation of this same anecdote appears to claim a similarly exalted role for secular poets like himself: the softening of readers' hard hearts. The mechanism of this transformation is the arousal of guilt and shame: what the Homily calls a "thorough feeling of our sins," an "earnest" sorrow, a felt "heaviness" proportional to the offense. Like the biblical prophets and the gospel, Sidney suggests, poets have power to catalyze the transformation of the suffering old man into a redeemed new man by rebuking the reader and eliciting his penitential emotions.

⁶³ "An Homilie of Repentance, and of true reconciliation unto God." *Certain Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I*, ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints), 265.

Sidney likely omits David's moments of misunderstanding in order to reinforce the *Defence's* argument that poetry has the power to move readers toward virtue naturally, "ere themselves be aware." But the possibility of misinterpretation that Sidney bypasses in the *Defence* resurfaces in his romance: when Arcadians confront a figurative "glass" which reflects their own sinfulness, the glass generally fails to elicit meaningful repentance or changed behavior.

GYNECIA'S PENITENCE IN THE *OLD ARCADIA*

Sidney begins his exploration of penitential experience in the *Old Arcadia's* narrative of Gynecia, the queen mother of Arcadia—a narrative that he retains largely unchanged in Books One and Two of his revised fiction. Gynecia has led a life of exemplary virtue up to the point when she falls in love with the young prince Pyrocles, who has come to the royal family's secluded palace (disguised as an Amazon named Zelmane) to seek the love of Gynecia's younger daughter Philoclea. From the start, Gynecia's love for the disguised prince is intertwined with a mounting sense of guilt and shame; she is simultaneously "pricked with the flames of love and the torments of her own conscience" (216). These penitential feelings distinguish Gynecia from the many other hopelessly lovestruck characters in this fiction. Her love for Pyrocles intensifies even as she recognizes that it is impossible for her to act on this desire without betraying her husband, harming her daughter, and incurring public disgrace.

At the opening of Book Two, Gynecia leaves her home at sunrise after a sleepless night and wanders in solitude with a "grieved and hopeless mind" (213). She pleads to the

heavens to help her maintain the chastity and fidelity she has maintained throughout her life, and she laments that her “imperfect proportion of reason” failed to “prevent” her from being overtaken by passion, rehearsing a familiar central theme of *OA* (214). In many Renaissance tragedies, conscience operates only retrospectively, after a character has committed an irreversible action, but Gynecia’s conscience serves as a prospective warning and guide, afflicting her before she makes any attempt to act on her desires: “There appeared unto the eyes of her judgment the evils she was like to run into, with ugly infamy waiting upon them: she felt the terrors of her own conscience; she was guilty of a long exercised virtue which made this vice the fuller of deformity” (213).⁶⁴ But the warnings of conscience, and the recognition that a woman of “long exercised virtue” should know better, prove ineffective; her desire outweighs all other concerns, including maternal love and fear of disgrace. Between Gynecia’s severe condemnations of herself, Sidney intersperses admissions that if her desire could be satisfied, she would still find “contentment” even in the face of self-hatred.

Christian and classical traditions ascribed educational and disciplinary value to shame, but in *Arcadia*, this affect serves only to harden Gynecia into a state of moral indifference: “in shame,” she tells herself, “there is no comfort but to be beyond all bounds of shame” (214).⁶⁵ In one of Sidney’s most startling demonstrations of the corrosive and disfiguring effects of desire, Gynecia confesses that she would rather kill her daughter with

⁶⁴ This passage includes minor changes from the *OA*, in which Gynecia “saw” (rather than felt) the terrors of her conscience, and “was witness of”, not “guilty of,” a long-exercised virtue (*OA* 80).

⁶⁵ Paul Cefalu argues for the practical inefficacy of classical and Christian shame ethics in *Arcadia* in *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17-46.

her own hands than see her enjoy Pyrocles' love (214). When Pyrocles rejects her advances later that same day, the queen returns home "full of raging agonies," experiencing internal battles that make her physically ill, but still ultimately determined to "stir up terrible tragedies rather than fail of her intent" (218).

Both Gynecia and her husband Basilius are enamored of Pyrocles (Basilius believes that the prince really is a beautiful Amazon woman). In Book Four of the *Old Arcadia*, Pyrocles devises a bed-trick to get both of his admirers out of the house so that he can steal away with Philoclea: he sends Basilius and Gynecia to a secluded cave at night, promising to wait for each of them there. It is Gynecia who first discovers the trick. After hearing her husband describe his love for Zelmane, she rebukes him for his infidelity and for foolishly succumbing to youthful passions at his age. Basilius's response to this rebuke is a dramatic reversal of his former ways: he learns his "lesson" of affection to her and vows to "repay the debt of this error with... interest" (727). Gynecia's unexpected "mildness" in declining to rebuke him further makes Basilius's heart "captive unto her, which otherwise perchance would have grown into a desperate carelessness" (728). This language evokes Christian accounts of unmerited grace, which makes it possible for penitents to feel love and assurance rather than fear and despair. Basilius's transformation at this moment is the best example this fiction provides of repentance as prescribed by the penitential treatises of Sidney's time: he undergoes humiliation and reformation, facilitated by his wife's unexpected "mildness," as a Christian sinner's transformation (and avoidance of despair) is facilitated by the marvelous intervention of undeserved grace. Here, as nowhere else, penitence works—and for that matter, so does a shaming rebuke.

Basilus's confession and amendment might lead readers to expect a comparable admission from Gynecia and reconciliation between the two, but Sidney frustrates this expectation with a characteristic romance strategy of disruption. Gynecia has brought a gold cup of sleeping potion to the cave, thinking it was a love potion that would force Pyrocles to fall for her. After Basilus's humble professions of renewed love, the presence of this cup serves as a vivid reminder that Gynecia has not yet revealed her own adulterous intentions to her husband. (Sidney associates this cup with misinterpretation and gaps in understanding: it has come down to Gynecia through several generations, and she has "wrong[ly] interpreted" its contents [846]) After Basilus drinks the potion in the cup and falls, apparently dead, Gynecia is overcome by remorse, as we saw in the opening pages of my Introduction.

When she goes to trial in Book Five, Gynecia continues to fiercely condemn herself and seek out the punishment she feels she deserves. But for all her impassioned statements of her own sin and worthlessness, she never confesses the real reason why she went to the cave—to meet Pyrocles, her daughter's lover. This is a surprising omission, especially in a romance that is otherwise committed to a comic resolution.

Unlike her husband, in whom penitence triggers an instantaneous and productive transformation, Gynecia sees no endpoint for penitence. She does not reach a point at which she has suffered enough or made a thorough confession of her actual crime. Instead, both her wayward desire and her inner "vexation" are simply pushed aside by practical exigencies: the Arcadians need to re-form the state and pair off the youthful princes and princesses in marriage, and Sidney needs to wrap up the *Old Arcadia* before it grows into a "monster" (to return to the self-disparaging language of his Preface). In the original romance's concluding

trial scene, Gynecia gets away with her attempt to betray her husband, and the narrator makes no reference to her desire for her daughter's death. The troublesome inter-generational attractions that throbbed through so much of the story simply dissipate; Pyrocles and Philoclea, the only characters who know Gynecia's secret, decorously sweep the memory of these attractions under the rug.

Here, as in *The Winter's Tale's* concluding scene, we find a glaring failure of acknowledgment at the heart of an otherwise wondrous, heartwarming happy ending. Sidney's brief side remark—"So uncertain are mortal judgments," referring to the court's mistaken judgment of Gynecia as wholly innocent—creates a destabilizing effect similar to the questions about Hermione's self-preservation that Shakespeare incorporates into that romance's conclusion. This remark calls attention to the questions that remain unanswered, and the deceptions that persist, in the midst of this family reconciliation.

Gynecia's repentance partly conforms to Protestant models: she thoroughly detests her fault, humbly accepts punishment, is forgiven, and subsequently amends her life, living out the rest of her days as a model of marital devotion and virtue. On the other hand, the hysterical and disproportionate extremes of Gynecia's guilt could be read as a comment on the excesses of passion fostered by Protestant penitential discourse, and on the ways in which radical faith-alone models, with their insistent denial of human agency, might actually preclude inter-personal apology and reconciliation in the secular world.

Modern editors have identified one explicit echo of *Arcadia* in *The Winter's Tale*, but the continuities between the two texts' conclusions may reveal deeper affinities between

these two troubled instances of the Renaissance romance mode.⁶⁶ In both romances, a not-really-dead person comes back to life, to the astonishment of all who behold the feigned miracle: “Whereat every man astonished... some began to fear spirits, some to look for a miracle, most to imagine they knew not what” (845). Like Leontes, proclaiming his own “shame” before his assembled family and courtiers, Basilius apologizes to his wife and “publicly desire[s] her pardon for those errors he committed.” (Both *Arcadias* evince Sidney’s abiding interest in the distinction between public and private matters, which is especially evident in his sestina about “public damage,” in which shepherds lament their collective grief at the death of the monarch [774]. In this line, Basilius’s public apology to Gynecia, whom he summons with “all pomp and ceremony” before the court, underscores Gynecia’s continued secrecy about her desires, which she never reveals even privately.) Most importantly, both works reveal the emotional strings attached to undeserved forgiveness, which motivates and binds the forgiven offender to exemplify virtuous action for the rest of her life—to earn, or “duly purchase,” the pardon she was given when she did not deserve it. (Gynecia’s obligation to be more faithful than ever to Basilius recalls Leontes’ moral obligation not to “shun” his wife again, “for then you kill her double.”)

In both works’ concluding scenes, the magic and miracle of forgiveness is bound up with pragmatic concerns. Pyrocles and Philoclea withhold Gynecia’s secret, possibly out of mercy, but perhaps also because the choice to bury this secret is in their own best interests. Sidney does not comment on their reasons; he just reports that they never “bewray” her

⁶⁶ Sidney’s description of lovers’ judgment, which makes his beloved’s every quality and action appear “superlative” in his eyes (682), has been convincingly identified as a source for Florizel’s praise of Perdita (4.4.135-146).

desire. Perhaps it is just such moments of courtesy (courtesy as Spenser imagines it in Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*: overlooking faults, pardoning transgressions, and giving offenders the benefit of the doubt) that make the continuation of family and polity possible—as much as, or more than, inner contrition and interpersonal forgiveness, which are fraught with potential for misinterpretation because of the intrinsic “uncertainty” of “mortal judgments.” Perhaps Sidney is suggesting that a real confrontation with the ways in which they have betrayed each other would be impossible for this family to sustain. In the prefatory statement to the 1593 edition of the *New Arcadia*, Sidney’s editor, Hugh Sanford, calls the composite text “the conclusion, not the perfection,” of the project Sidney had envisioned. The same phrase might apply to this scene, which brings a functional, if not a perfect, conclusion to Gynecia’s penitential struggle.

The *Old Arcadia* thus fastens a provisional ending onto Gynecia’s protracted internal struggle, but the *New Arcadia* does not incorporate any such conclusions. Here, Sidney renders the penitential fantasy of completion—what Basilius calls “repaying” one’s moral debts “with interest”—increasingly untenable. The “bottomless pit of sorrow” (729) that inexplicably fades out in the conclusion to Gynecia’s story gets reimagined and amplified in Amphialus’s narrative. Amphialus’s desires and subsequent actions are far more consequential than Gynecia’s; he does try to kill himself, and fails even there, causing yet another unintended death in the process. Amphialus manifests Sidney’s attention to the pain and endlessness of self-confrontation, *and* the evasive maneuvers by which (even in the deepest throes of real contrition) penitents still avoid coming clean and doing right by the people most immediately hurt by their sins. This is the same dynamic of avoidance and

redistribution of complicity that Stanley Cavell and Harry Berger, Jr. elucidate in Shakespeare's tragedies.⁶⁷ Sidney's representation of these tragically paired features of human experience—the internal pain of penitence, and the failures of interpersonal acknowledgment that correspond with it—may constitute his most important legacy to Shakespeare.

MORAL RULES AND RAGING WOES

Sidney's revisions to the *Old Arcadia* in the 1580's reveal his deepening concern with what Wayne Rebhorn describes as a central preoccupation of Renaissance rhetoric: the “fundamentally unstable, unpredictable, always potentially destructive” nature of the emotions themselves, which put orators in danger of provoking unintended, destructive reactions from their audience.⁶⁸ For the rhetoricians Rebhorn discusses, the primary danger of emotions' volatility is political disorder—sedition can spread like wildfire or disease, beyond the orator's control, at odds with his intentions. But for contemporary pastors and authors of penitential handbooks, the primary dangers of ineffective rhetoric included impenitence and hardened hearts (the sermon fails to move auditors onto the godly path) at one extreme, and despair at the other (an excessive, non-edifying emotional response that an

⁶⁷ See Harry Berger, Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford University Press, 1997), and Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-123.

⁶⁸ *The Emperor of Men's Minds*, 83. On Renaissance rhetoricians' concerns about the instability of emotions, see 80-89.

orator might inadvertently produce when he is only trying to elicit salutary feelings of guilt and shame).⁶⁹

Sidney was an active participant in Elizabethan conversations about the destructive and edifying potential of emotions. His interest in emotional experience was shaped by his background as a humanist concerned with the rhetorical problems of arousing audiences' emotions, as a Christian who translated the work of the French Protestant Philippe Duplessis-Mornay,⁷⁰ and as a contemporary of the physician and clergyman Timothy Bright.⁷¹ In his fiction, Sidney grappled with the representational challenges posed by emotional experience—the difficulty of turning one's inside outward. The *New Arcadia's* formal tendencies toward excess, exaggeration, and melodrama constitute one response to this challenge. These formal features mark moments when Sidney strains against language's

⁶⁹ As I will discuss in Chapter Two, Edmund Spenser also explores this rhetorical danger in *The Faerie Queene's* episodes of penitential discipline and admonition. Figures like Patience in Book One and the Hermit in Book Six teach lessons of harsh personal mortification and self-criticism that produce the same devastating emotional effects as the rhetoric of Despair.

⁷⁰ On Sidney's connections to the French Protestant leader Philippe de Mornay, also known as Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, see Roger Kuin, "Life, Death, and the Daughter of Time: Philip and Mary Sidney's Translations of Duplessis-Mornay," in *French Connections in the English Renaissance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 143-60.

⁷¹ Timothy Bright maintained lifelong connections to the Sidney circle through Sir Francis Walsingham, but Philip does not appear to have had a close relationship with the physician; there is no record of the two interacting or corresponding after the Massacre. However, the experience made a deep impression on Bright. In 1584, he dedicated a treatise on medicine to Sidney, and his dedicatory letter recalls how the two took refuge together during the bloodshed, "which my mind shudders to recall, and flees from in grief" (*In Physicam G.A. Scribonii* [Cambridge, 1584], quoted in Alan Stewart, *Sidney: A Double Life*, 88). On Bright's biographical connection to Sidney, see Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 60 and 271, and Stewart, *Sidney: A Double Life*, 87-90. On Bright's life and work, see Geoffrey Keynes, *Dr. Timothie Bright 1550-1615: A Survey of his Life with a Bibliography of his Writings* (London: The Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1962); William J. Carlton, *Timothie Bright Doctor of Physicke*; and Patricia Brewerton, "Several Keys to Ope' the Character": The Political and Cultural Significance of Timothy Bright's "Characterie," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33.4 (2002): 945-961.

limits. The description of Musidorus struggling to compose an apology, with which I began this chapter, embeds this same kind of strain (to convey the full depth of remorse in language that can only ever be inadequate to this task) into the story itself.

The volatility of emotions in general, and of audience response to emotionally stirring rhetoric, is distinct from the specific question of how a rhetor can best arouse and convey penitence. Yet conscience literature in the period repeatedly suggests that penitential feelings—guilt, shame, and despair—constitute the *most* volatile, and the most resistant to representation, of all human emotions. For Elizabethan and Jacobean writers interested in the infectious, destabilizing effects of the passions, penitence provided not only a representative example but a limit-case extreme. One way around the problem of representing penitence is to evoke it with a lengthy series of similes, as Burton frequently does in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Another is to appeal to the reader's own experience and urge him to imagine what the writer himself is unable to render in words. "Your experience exceedeth my report," Bright writes to his friend M, the sufferer of melancholy and afflicted conscience to whom Bright addresses his *Treatise of Melancholy*. Richard Linaker tries to make God's mercy toward unworthy sinners comprehensible by comparing it to the overwhelming compassion a parent would feel for her own sick child.⁷² Direct description may be impossible, these authors recognize, but readers' shared experiences of fallenness and vulnerability to shame make provisional representations of penitential suffering possible.

Sidney sets up an opposition between emotional overflow and didactic containment in a poetic dialogue that he incorporates into both versions of the *Arcadia*: a conflict between

⁷² Linaker, *A comfortable treatise for such as are afflicted in conscience* (London 1595), n.p.

a speaker who counsels rational control over the passions (the wise shepherd Boulon in the *Old Arcadia*, the bumbling king Basilius in the *New*) and a grieving speaker named Plangus who responds, “Can I in moral rules let raging woes contained be?” Against critics who believe that Sidney firmly sides with the schoolmasterly speaker of stoic maxims in this dialogue, I argue that the *New Arcadia* reveals Sidney’s increasing emphasis on “raging woes” as distinct from “moral rules.” In this story, grief tends to overflow its boundaries, resisting characters’ attempts to make sense of it or derive lessons from it. In his revision, Sidney devotes increased attention to irreconcilable emotional conflicts within his characters (conflicts that cannot be condensed into, or resolved by, an instructive maxim), and he writes several episodes in which shared suffering spreads between characters like an uncontrollable blaze or contagion. Sidney’s growing sense that emotional woes resist containment by didactic rules is evident not only in these episodes but in the *New Arcadia*’s formal features of *copia*, repetition, and amplification. In a memorable instance of self-indulgent play with words, Sidney describes the prince Pyrocles as “exceedingly sorry for Pamela, but exceedingly exceeding that exceedingness in fear for Philoclea” (559). This line both describes and exemplifies the *New Arcadia*’s form, which tends toward proliferation and “exceedingness” especially at moments when Sidney is describing intense emotional pain. Contemporary treatises frequently note the elusiveness of penitential feeling, which exceeds all other emotions in its resistance to verbal description and definition. Sidney’s endlessly exfoliating fiction joins these treatises in an effort to multiply descriptions and figurations around an ultimately indescribable center: an internal feeling that cannot in fact be anatomized like a body, cauterized like a wound, or contained like liquid in a vessel.

At the beginning of his dialogue with Plangus in the *New Arcadia*, Basilius is dismissive of the traveler's grief; he asks him to stop his "moanful music" and urges him to turn to God for consolation (297-8). Plangus has come to Arcadia in search of the fiction's two truant heroes, Pyrocles and Musidorus. He seeks to enlist their help in the rescue of Erona, a princess whom Plangus loves. Erona is being held in captivity by the tyrannical queen Artaxia, who plans to burn her at the stake within two years if the princes Pyrocles and Musidorus do not come forth to save her. After Plangus narrates the story of his love for Erona and his helplessness to save her, the king reluctantly acknowledges that the tale has moved him:

Thy wailing words do much my spirits move,
They uttered are in such a feeling fashion,
That sorrow's work against my will I prove.
Methinks I am partaker of thy passion,
And in thy case do glass my own debility;
Self-guilty folk most prone to feel compassion. (299)

Basilius' statement of how the story moved him is in many ways consistent with the poetics of the *Defence*: he says the story stirred him against his will, and he attributes this power to the particular "feeling fashion" in which Plangus told it. But Basilius soon shifts back into the rhetoric of restraint, urging Plangus "to hold these worldly things in...proportion" (299). At one point, he even repudiates his own moment of sympathy: "We pity deem that which but weakness is."

In the *Old Arcadia*, these words are spoken by Boulon, a wise shepherd and figure of counsel. For Alan Sinfield, Boulon's call for rational control over the passions represents "the last word" in this dialogue. Boulon himself represents "Sidney's ideal reader," who may become temporarily "involved" in scenes of suffering and fellow-feeling, but who finally

surmounts this emotional weakness and remains “committed to the larger ethical perspective.”⁷³ Sinfield presumes a continuity across disparate moments of Sidney’s career: the assertive moralist of the *Defence* becomes a maker of fictions designed to entrap and rebuke his readers, who is in control of these fictions and successfully produces the sought-after didactic effects. But I argue that as Sidney writes the revised *Arcadia*, he becomes increasingly troubled and fascinated by the intractable difficulties of emotional experience and involvement, and increasingly skeptical about the possibility of adopting a stance of wise “detachment” from which one might convert painful experience into an edifying lesson. This change in sensibility is evident as Sidney reframes Plangus’s dialogue for the revised *Arcadia*. The wise counselor Boulon is replaced by Duke Basilius, a highly vulnerable, impassioned character, who worries that his words might only worsen Plangus’s pain.

If taken as a self-contained text, this poem would seem to endorse Basilius’ remarks, condensing this exchange of pain and sympathy into a lesson on the importance of rational self-control. This reading would support the view of Sidney’s poetics recently proposed by Joseph Campana, who claims that Sidney tends to organize scenes of suffering and shared affect into neat moral lessons, favoring “clear rhetorical images of moral truth” that divorce poetic language from what Campana sees as its most valuable qualities: “its recalcitrant physicality, its vulnerability to time and change, and its capacity to excite and transmit affect.”⁷⁴ Sidney attends to affective vulnerability far more than Campana acknowledges, and he appears deeply skeptical about whether the painful experiences of sympathy and remorse can translate into moral instruction. This skepticism is most evident in Sidney’s

⁷³ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁴ Campana, “On Not Defending Poetry,” 33-34.

characterization of Amphialus, but it's also visible within this scene as Plangus challenges Basilius's rhetoric, protesting, "Can I...in moral rules let raging woes contained be?" (300). Basilius's maxims do not successfully console or "contain" Plangus' pain; indeed, at one point he fears that he may have worsened it. Considering that Basilius himself will later fall victim to an uncontrollable desire for Zelmane, his statements here lose their didactic force and serve only as an incriminating testimony against his own "debility."

The dialogue between Plangus and Basilius reveals Sidney's attraction to moralized *sententiae* that elevate reason over passion, imposing a regulatory "grammar" upon the shameful "incongruities" of embodied experience. But it also reveals his deepening sense that "moral rules" cannot in fact contain "raging woes." Basilius has the last word in the dialogue, but Plangus's intense grief lingers, resurfacing dramatically in Amphialus. Arcadia is a world populated by living exemplars of virtue and vice, but Sidney shows that it is also a world where moral maxims and vows set in stone are vulnerable—like bodies—to blots, change, and decay.

Basilius's words to Plangus resemble conscience literature in their sententiousness and in Basilius's effort to shape Plangus's senseless suffering, impotence, and self-hate into a narrative of progress. In this narrative, grief and sorrow have their place, but only as intermediary steps to be superseded on the path towards moral purification and perfection. Grief proves our judgment; guilt makes us compassionate; moments of compassion are compatible with right acting as long as we pull back from them towards prudent detachment. The most important connection between Basilius's remarks and post-Reformation conscience literature is that both discourses attempt to impose a shape—an encyclopedia, a

ramifying chart of sententiae and speaking pictures, a narrative—onto emotional experiences that intrinsically resist such organizational efforts. Basilius voices a preference for sententiae that Sidney partly shares (as a moralist and defender of literature’s didactic power), but Sidney’s fiction—especially his revision—calls the effectiveness of such sententiae into question. By “effectiveness,” I mean their ability to console the afflicted, to adequately represent the experiences they describe, to persuade and transform an audience. Here, for instance, Basilius fails either to console Plangus or to persuade him.⁷⁵

In the story of Nathan and David, the reflecting “glass” of fiction reveals a mirror image of the listener’s own likeness. But in the *New Arcadia*, Sidney also uses the term “glass” (as both noun and verb) to designate an incriminating contrast—not a mirror, but a foil. The unnamed blind king of Paphlagonia (the model for Gloucester in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*) is already sick with remorse when Sidney introduces him, but he feels increasingly guilty when he contrasts himself to his virtuous son Leonatus, whose kindness serves as a “a glass” that reveals his own “naughtiness” (278). Similarly, in Book Three, the shining virtue of the captive princess Pamela reveals her captor Cecropia’s wickedness:

⁷⁵ Daniel Gibbons’ recent essay on mourning and early modern lyric, “Rewriting Spiritual Community: Spenser, Donne, and the *Book of Common Prayer*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 54.1 (2012): 8-44, describes a similar tension between emotional pain and didactic consolation in Spenser’s “November” eclogue, when Colin Clout’s song fails to cheer the grieving shepherd Thenot. Gibbons interprets this failure as a response to the “anxieties” that might have beset Elizabethan mourners after the publication of the 1559 prayer book, which sealed the English Church’s abolition of purgatory and traditional practices of mourning and interceding for the dead (19). In the aftermath of this historical shift, Gibbons argues, it becomes “theologically difficult to find a way of mourning that does not either condemn the deceased to damnation...or impiously deny the joy of salvation” (21). Gibbons’ insight that Spenser turns toward sociality and hospitality as alternative sources of consolation in the aftermath of this historical loss is consistent with my readings of *The Faerie Queene* and *The Winter’s Tale* in the following chapters. Sidney’s *Arcadia*, however, offers a relatively negative outlook on the possibility of interpersonal consolation.

So foully was the filthiness of impiety discovered by the shining of [Pamela's] unstained goodness (so far as either Cecropia saw indeed, or else the guilty amazement of a self-accusing conscience made her eyes untrue judges of their natural object) that there was a light more than human which gave a luster to her perfections. (492)

Sidney suggests that Cecropia's guilt has led her to idealize the princess, endowing her with a false appearance of divine radiance. (This sort of distorted vision ultimately proves fatal for Cecropia when she sees Amphialus approaching her with a sword and, "stricken with the guiltiness of her own conscience" (573), mistakenly assumes he means to kill her). But unlike the Paphlagonian king, whose sensitivity and remorse are so extreme that they eventually kill him, Cecropia proves too corrupt to be decisively moved by this spectacle. However powerfully Cecropia's guilt distorts her perception of Pamela, it does not lead her to change her ways: "like a bat which, though it have eyes to discern that there is a sun, yet hath so evil eyes that it cannot delight in the sun, [Cecropia] found a truth but could not love it" (492). Not only does Cecropia fail to love the truth she has seen; Pamela's virtue actually moves her "the more to hate."

Critics invested in Sidney as a practitioner of "Protestant poetics," including Alan Sinfield and Andrew Wiener, describe his writing as follows: Sidney the Calvinist writes a story about flawed, sinful characters who repent their transgressions and are consequently pardoned. He is fully in control of his fiction, which produces the desired effects: readers become convinced of their own sinfulness, which is the first step on the pathway to godliness. In contrast, I claim that Sidney recognized the unpredictable and unstable nature of audience responses to emotionally charged persuasion; for instance, Cecropia in *Arcadia* and Alexander Phereus in the *Defence* are examples of auditors who respond to shaming

rebukes by closing themselves off, hardening their hearts against further mollification. Sidney attended explicitly to this problem in his fiction, though it remains understandably peripheral in the *Defence*. As Sidney grew more doubtful about literature's didactic value in light of this concern about the volatility of emotional response, he experimented with more novelistic, self-aware writing, and with renderings of characters' inner psychological struggles. This change suggests an emerging sense of aesthetic ambition alongside, but independent of, Sidney's didactic efforts.

AMPHIALUS'S SELF-DESTRUCTION

Sidney's increasing interest in emotional experience without a didactic or redemptive outcome is evident in his most prominent revision to *Arcadia* as a whole: the siege narrative of Book Three, which describes a man repeatedly consumed by critical self-knowledge and emotional pain but unable to learn any edifying lessons from this suffering. Some critics do find didactic lessons for readers within Amphialus's story, arguing that he teaches soldiers (by good example) how to be brave and fierce, or cautions readers in general (by bad example) not to let passions and self-interest overtake us.⁷⁶ But I suggest that Sidney makes this story too morally ambiguous to serve as a clear didactic model. Readers who do interpret him this way are forced to redact considerable portions of his narrative; for example, Katherine Craik argues that Amphialus's bravery and courteous virtue make him an

⁷⁶ Katherine Craik reads Amphialus as a good example for soldiers: *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England*, 72. Walter Davis reads Amphialus as a negative example, a weak and selfish man whose "egotism" and susceptibility to passion bring about the downfall he deserves: "A Map of Arcadia," 132-134.

exemplar for soldiers, but her analysis never mentions his prolonged experience of suicidal despair.

Amphialus's suffering reveals Sidney's attention to the lived experience of penitential feeling, as distinct from penitence as the middle portion of an end-oriented narrative of providential judgment and salvation (or, a pedagogical narrative of instruction through rebuke). In this harrowing account of a man who manifests shame and remorse by physically wounding himself, Sidney explores the interplay of spiritual and bodily pain. This interplay was a central concern of conscience literature, as is evident in the titles of treatises like William Perkins' *Salve for a Sick Man* (a book of spiritual consolations for the afflicted conscience) and Thomas Adams' *Diseases of the Soul*. But while conscience literature emphasizes cures and salves for penitential pain, Sidney dwells on the sickness itself: what it feels like, how it disfigures those who suffer from it, and how it frustrates the forward movement of a story, giving rise to narrative states of impasse and paralysis.

Amphialus is an admirable soldier and courtier in many respects, but he complies with his villainous mother Cecropia when she imprisons the Arcadian princesses and leads a rebellion to seize control of the kingdom. Amphialus feels guilty for consenting to his mother's actions, and his remorse deepens as he commits a series of unintentional offenses on the battlefield. Penitential suffering dominates Sidney's descriptions of this character, but this suffering conspicuously fails to point towards a redemptive conclusion. Rather than learning from mistakes in such a way as to change for the better, Amphialus remains irreconcilably torn between loyalty to his mother and compassion for the victims of her

campaign. This internal division finally consumes the knight, and his final act before the narrative breaks off is a failed suicide attempt.

Sidney signals Amphialus's self-division from the outset. Before he is introduced into the story in person, Musidorus finds pieces of his armor scattered through the forest and learns that the knight has cast them off in a fit of grief after inadvertently causing the death of his dearest friend. This incident anticipates a pattern that Sidney develops throughout Book Three, in which Amphialus repeatedly feels stung by compassion and guilt upon realizing he has killed someone he did not mean to harm. "Compassion" for the young and beautiful soldier Agenor leads Amphialus to lower his lance in mid-charge (468), but he does so too late to avoid striking the boy. Sympathy later disrupts Amphialus's combat with Argalus, whose devoted wife Parthenia rushes between them and pleads for mercy (507). Amphialus turns back to the wounded Argalus and offers to end the fight, "melting with compassion at so passionate a sight," but he relents too late.

The most grievous of these inadvertent fatalities occurs shortly after this episode, when Amphialus accepts a challenge from an unknown knight. The challenger wears an impresa of a child with two heads, one dead, the other "looking for death." Amphialus feels touched by a sense of identification and "affinity" for this knight before they even meet; he interprets the knight's morbid apparel as a sign of their shared longing for death (527). Amphialus fights honorably and prevails, but just after striking a fatal blow, he removes his opponent's helmet and makes a horrifying discovery: she is a woman, Parthenia, the devoted widow of a knight he recently killed in combat. Amphialus drops his sword and sinks to his knees beside Parthenia, "astonished with grief, compassion, and shame" (528). Parthenia's

impresa prefigures the grotesque combination of beauty and gore in Sidney's account of her death (528). The narrator praises her fair eyes, rosy cheeks, and alabaster neck, but then moves into a strangely aestheticized description of her suffering: the pallor of impending death beautifies the blush of her cheeks, and the "dainty blood" spilling from her neck gives a flattering "luster" to her fair skin. I suggest that Sidney deliberately includes these disturbing descriptions in order to frame this whole scene as a kind of nightmare vision—that is, as it appears to Amphialus himself. Amphialus perceives Parthenia through "spectacles of pity" that magnify both her pain and her fairness, much as Cecropia's troubled conscience increased Pamela's radiance.

As Parthenia dies, a sense of affective shock sweeps through the gathered crowd like an epidemic:

... as if the air had been infected with sorrow, no heart was so hard but was subject to that contagion, the rareness of the accident matching together (the rarely matched together) pity and admiration. (530)

This scene of contagious sorrow reveals a strain of tragedy that becomes increasingly prominent in Sidney's unfinished revision of the romance. This is just one of a series of moments at which Amphialus discovers that he has inadvertently killed an innocent person. In these instants of belated recognition, Amphialus's expectations of chivalric honor give way to a crushing sense of penitential suffering: shame, remorse, and compassion for the victim whose life he is powerless to restore. His suffering, in turn, unleashes an uncontrollable flood of fellow-feeling in others.

Although these people have witnessed a real death in battle, not a stage performance, they experience the same effects that Sidney attributes to tragedy in his *Defence*: pity,

admiration, and the softening of hard hearts. The language of medicine and poetics in this passage recalls the *Defence's* account of the transformative power of tragedy,

...that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded. (*Defence* 230)

To illustrate tragedy's power to reform spectators by "stirring" their negative "affects," Sidney cites the classical example of Alexander Phereus, a tyrant who had killed many of his subjects without remorse but "could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy." Phereus was moved to tears by a tragic play, and he left the theatre to keep from "hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart" (*Defence* 230). In the *Defence*, emotions have an instructive value that Sidney compares to the healing power of medicine and surgery; the poet stirs his readers' affects in order to move them to repent for their past failures and change their lives.⁷⁷ But the melodramatic spectacle of Parthenia's death suggests that as Sidney revised his fiction in the years after he composed the *Defence*, he came to view the passions as more contagious than medicinal.

The pressure of these combined scenes leads Amphialus to split into two opposing selves and to break his sword into pieces. He becomes so self-critical that he is no longer sure of his own identity, and he talks to himself in terms that anticipate Richard III's crisis of conscience: "Am I indeed Amphialus? Have not passions killed him, and wretched I, I know

⁷⁷ On softening hard hearts and other corporeal metaphors for the effects of didactic poetry in Sidney's *Defence* and George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, see Katherine Craik, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 42-43. See also Robert Stillman, "The Truths of a Slippery World: Poetry and Tyranny in Sidney's *Defence*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55.4 (2002), 1289, on metaphors of bodily cleansing, discipline, and purgation in the *Defence*.

not how, succeeded into his place?” (540). After the personified figures of Sorrow and Shame display his crimes before his eyes later that night (545), he berates himself in the second person, splitting himself into the roles of judge and accused criminal. When his despair reaches its suicidal breaking point, he shifts into the third person: “Fear not, cowardly hand, for thou shalt kill but a cowardly traitor...him whom Philoclea hateth” (574).

Amphialus’s suicide attempt fails, and it seems probable that Sidney would have narrated his healing and marriage to Helen of Corinth if he had lived to finish the revision. Although this lack of conclusion obviously results from Sidney’s death, I find it hard to resist the speculation that Amphialus’s story is in some sense unfinishable. Sidney describes this character’s guilt as so intractable and consuming that it becomes difficult to imagine a redemptive endpoint for it. Even if he obtained the princesses’ forgiveness, Amphialus would never be able to undo the damage he had caused. Although the knight’s scattered armor was reassembled into a whole earlier in the narrative, the events of Book Three make it seem improbable that his fragmented self will ever become fully re-integrated. What is clear is that Amphialus’s near-death unleashes a flood of grief among his followers, who sympathize with him so closely that they feel personally wounded, “thinking their safety bled in his wounds and their honor died in his destruction” (575). Many tear their clothes, wound themselves, and “[sprinkle] their own blood in the air” (579).

Among the onlookers who gather around Amphialus’s body, which Sidney calls a “passionate...spectacle” laid before their “compassionate sense,” no voice of morality emerges; no wise counselor steps forth with maxims to gloss the meaning of this painful event, as Basilius did for Plangus’s grief. As if to highlight the absence of an instructive

moral to this story, the narrator reports, “others’ grief taught them grief” (579). Amphialus’s decline reveals Sidney’s sense of the sheer, sometimes insurmountable pain involved in critical self-reflection, and, I suggest, testifies to Sidney’s skepticism about the use of moral exemplars to deal with that pain in a didactic way. To recall Plangus’s resonant question, Amphialus’s suffering suggests that “raging woes” cannot “in moral rules contained be.”

SATISFACTION DEFERRED

As Heather Hirschfeld demonstrates in her recent study of early drama and penitence, the impossibility of “satisfaction”—doing or suffering enough (*satis*) to make amends for sin—was a central preoccupation for English Protestants in the late sixteenth century.⁷⁸ In theory, reformers insisted that Christ’s death was sufficient to satisfy the debt of sin and ridiculed Catholic traditions of penal satisfaction for according salvific value to human penitential works. But in practice, as John Bossy shows, most Christian communities continued to accord social value to practices of restitution, compensation, payback, and getting even; both clergymen and their congregations struggled to let go of the logic of penal satisfaction.⁷⁹ On the global level, Sidney stages the impossibility of satisfaction by setting his fiction in a world without a Christian redeemer; in this setting, Christ’s passion—the only source of satisfaction that early modern Protestants recognized as legitimate—is unavailable to the characters. In his account of Musidorus’s third and final combat with Amphialus, Sidney explores the impossibility of satisfaction on a more local scale.

⁷⁸ See Heather Hirschfeld, *The End of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁷⁹ John Bossy, “Practices of Satisfaction,” *Retribution, Repentance and Reconciliation*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 111.

Each knight imagines that his opponent's death will provide him with a kind of satisfaction: "thy death shall satisfy thy injury and my malice, and pay for the cruelty thou showedst," Musidorus avows (542). But as Sidney narrates this prolonged and increasingly brutal battle, such satisfaction is continually deferred, becoming as elusive as the "acquittal" and "release" that Spenser's narrator repeatedly promises and withholds from Mirabella. As the men fight to the point of exhaustion, with no visible gains on either side, Amphialus becomes "so tormented" in his "unquiet heart" that he "resolve(s) to see a quick end" by rushing at his opponent with renewed fury (538). (Later descriptions of Amphialus's self-destruction intimate that for this despairing character, even defeat would be preferable to the torment of this prolonged impasse.) Sidney describes the knights as increasingly *dissatisfied* with each blow: "But as the fire, the more fuel is put to it, the more hungry still it is to devour more, so the more they strake, the more unsatisfied they were with striking" (538). The battle finally ends without a decisive victory for either side, as both knights become too badly injured and exhausted to continue.

Sidney's language throughout this battle sequence emphasizes the difficulty of rendering internal sorrow visible and external. Both the characters and their maker strain against the limits of (verbal and pictorial) expression to communicate emotional intensity. Sidney describes the battle in excruciating detail, yet also claims that it defies representation: it is as cruel "as eye did ever see, or thought could reasonably imagine; far beyond the reach of weak words to be able to express it" (539). Amphialus tries to signify his sorrow and "inward affliction" by wearing all black, "as if he would turn his inside outward" (535), but such transparent communication of his inward state is impossible (although Sidney does

literalize the notion of externalizing the internal, perhaps in a moment of dark parody, when Musidorus strikes Amphialus “so horrible a wound that his guts came out withal” [542]). The color black, despite its darkness and its traditional associations with mourning, is not enough to convey these knights’ sorrow; Sidney calls attention to this insufficiency when he describes how the knights’ blood stains their black garments “as if it would give a more lively color of mourning than black can do” (538).

Sidney describes Musidorus and Amphialus as near-doubles: “force against force, skill against skill” are “interchangeably encountered” (537) in their combat. Amphialus finds his own sorrow reflected in the forsaken knight’s black livery, “as black as sorrow itself could see itself in the blackest glass” (535). Both knights, who believe themselves forsaken by the women they love, wear insignia depicting helpless creatures deprived of the celestial bodies that sustain their lives: Musidorus’s headpiece, a “catoblepta” (a mythical creature that lies dead without moonlight), mirrors Amphialus’s *impresa* of a shadow lamenting its banishment from the sun “whereof it had its life.” Even their horses are virtually identical, “coal black too, not having so much as one star... so as one would have thought they had been the two sons of sorrow and were come hither to fight for their birthright in that sorry inheritance” (536). In this macabre variation on a traditional chivalric contest, the knights try to outdo each other not only in their fighting prowess, but in their superlative expressions of sorrow and shame.

Paired images of self-punishment suffuse this scene: Musidorus wears a whip *impresa* “to witness a self-punishing repentance” (534), and Amphialus condemns himself inwardly and agrees with the knight’s reproaches. Throughout the fight, the knights inwardly

rebuke and attack themselves, each condemning himself as unworthy of his lady's love, reflecting on the shame he is incurring, and disparaging all of his previous accomplishments as meaningless (540). Both knights become internally divided, estranged from themselves. Amphialus wonders, "Am I indeed Amphialus?," while Musidorus "with no less spite [falls] out with himself." The superlative martial prowess of both knights—Amphialus has slain "monsters and giants," and Musidorus, in nearly defeating him, has "bettered the most esteemed knight in the world"—calls attention to their helplessness against internal opponents. Musidorus condemns himself more harshly than "the impudentest backbiter" would have done (544), and Sidney later writes of Amphialus that "no man could think another worthy of greater punishment than he thought himself" (572).

Sidney describes the knights' respective recoveries one after the other, and the conspicuous parallels between these descriptions suggest that Sidney composed them as variations on a theme of self-condemnation. Two brothers carry the wounded Amphialus home; two friends carry Musidorus. Musidorus is healed by "the diligent care of friends and well applied cunning of surgeons" (544), Amphialus by "the diligent care of cunning surgeons" (545). Both feel at war with themselves: Amphialus "wounds his mind," and Musidorus "[falls] to war with his own thoughts." Both become obsessed by a sense of unworthiness. Amphialus wishes he had died, so that Philoclea would have at least regarded him as a "worthy servant," while Musidorus refuses comfort because he feels he has not earned it:

[T]hough he had done beyond all others' expectation, yet so short was he of his own that he hated to look upon the sun that had seen him do so weakly: and much abhorred all visitation or honor (whereof he thought himself unworthy)... till he had made success excuse this (as he thought) want in him. (544)

The formal structure of disruption in these sentences evokes the lived experience of doubting one's own worthiness. In particular, the parentheticals "as he thought" and "he thought himself" mark the disparity between others' compliments and Musidorus's unforgiving evaluations of himself. As long as he falls short of the decisive conquest that he had "promised himself," Musidorus will remain "at war with his own thoughts" (544). This internal war is rendered more painful and isolating by Musidorus's deep sense that he is unworthy of the praise others lavish upon him.

What do the parallels between these recovery scenes help to illuminate about Amphialus, or about penitential feeling in *Arcadia* more broadly? Two contrasts stand out in relief against Sidney's general pattern of doubling. First, Musidorus appears more preoccupied than his opponent by the praise he receives from others; Amphialus's struggle is more solitary, attended only by his physicians and by the personifications of Sorrow and Shame who visit him to lay his offenses before his eyes, painted in their "ugliest colors." Like Pandosto, the penitent protagonist of Robert Greene's romance, Amphialus seeks "no other companion but sorrow."⁸⁰ Second, Musidorus's self-attack, unlike that of his double Amphialus, admits of a discernible endpoint: the indications of what would constitute "success" are clear in his case. (He could defeat Amphialus, subdue Cecropia's rebellion, liberate her captives, and attain Pamela's forgiveness.) Musidorus knows that his cause is just, but Amphialus lacks this inner consolation: as the leader of an uprising against Arcadia's rightful prince, he is "both rebellious and cowardly," and faces "reproach and ruin" no matter where he turns. For Amphialus, whose very desires are corrupt and compromised, no

⁸⁰ Greene, *Pandosto*, 420.

“success” is imaginable. The only release he can imagine is death. He tears at his wounds, like Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight gnawing at his own sinews in the House of Holinesse, and refuses both sustenance and medical care until his mother forces him to accept treatment (545).

Musidorus’s self-worth is at stake in this battle, not only in the sense that Amphialus is his most powerful political enemy, but also in the sense that Amphialus personifies the very qualities Musidorus seeks to destroy in himself: internal division, selfishness, and failure to control his erotic desires. Dolven writes that Amphialus makes it possible for Musidorus and Pyrocles to do battle with a daemon of the very impulses that tarnished their exemplarity in the *Old Arcadia*.⁸¹ Sidney’s formal strategy of presenting one character as a receptacle for others’ repudiated flaws bears a significant resemblance to the ideal of *metanoia*—the repudiation of a sinful old man and birth of a “new man”—in Protestant penitential discourse. What if a penitent could achieve a definitive personal reformation by isolating his own worst qualities into a separate, external figure and then killing that figure? The battle scene I have just described is, in part, about the impossibility of such a reformation—of definitively vanquishing one’s own internal enemies and becoming a “new creature.” As such, it contributes to Sidney’s critical interrogation of Protestant ideals of *metanoia* throughout the *New Arcadia*. But Sidney does not simply show that sorrow feels debilitating and that both conversion and satisfaction (in its penitential or martial forms) are endlessly deferred. He also acknowledges the appeal of conversion and satisfaction as fantasies of resolution, however unattainable they may be in practice. Sidney’s battle scene between

⁸¹ Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction*, 197.

warriors who rival one another in shame explores what Harry Berger, Jr. calls the “dream of a one-time future reformation”⁸²—the familiar human impulse to contain suffering within this-worldly struggles and interactions, such as a duel, in order to conceive of it as finite and controllable.

THE CONCLUSION, NOT THE PERFECTION

Sidney set out to make a new book that would redeem the faults of the old: a more exhaustive compendium of virtue and vice, a gallery of instructive pictures, a story of heroic princes clearly divided from their wicked adversaries. But the story he wrote instead betrays Sidney’s ongoing preoccupation with the wayward and powerful desires he had depicted in the original—and his heroes, not quite purified after all, remain contaminated by those desires. The revision takes up a new interest in retrospection and apology, in making past wrongs right; in the *New Arcadia* we find not only lovesick shepherds’ lamenting songs, but an anguished scene of writing, an apology note that can never be sufficient.

In this chapter, I have suggested that Sidney’s *New Arcadia* constitutes a conscious reflection on the difficulty of transforming oneself into a new creature and, more broadly, on the frustrations that imaginative writers shared with Christian penitents in the aftermath of the English Reformation. These frustrations include the desire for total alteration and forgiveness, the sense that our work is always insufficient and incomplete, and the pain of internal judgment that cuts us off from the consolations that others try to offer. This engagement with penitential culture produces many of the moments that make Sidney’s

⁸² *Making Trifles of Terrors*, 312.

fiction more interesting and strange than many modern readers have acknowledged; his apparently toyful, trifling book was actually in dialogue with penitential theory, one of the most contested cultural issues of Sidney's time.

Sidney's revised fiction demonstrates a profound interest in emotional experience and explores the ways in which such experience resists organization into exemplary moral lessons. Moreover, Sidney's redaction of the Samuel story suggests that even within the *Defence*, Sidney's case for poetry's instructive clarity is troubled by some awareness that this clarity is an ideal seldom achieved in human experience. Throughout the *New Arcadia*, affect clouds characters' perceptions and makes them unreceptive to the force of a reforming "glass" or instructive example. In addition to describing a range of ways in which characters distort, misunderstand, or reject moral instruction, Sidney also considers the dangers that arise at the opposite extreme, when a character becomes *excessively* sensitive to reminders of his own faults and even seeks out self-condemnation. In the cases of Amphialus and the blind Paphlagonian king, recognition of guilt leads not toward a reform of ethical praxis but toward a fatal inundation of emotional pain.

I have foregrounded moments of emotional impasse and overflow in this complex text in order to invite a critical re-appraisal of the *New Arcadia's* aesthetic value for modern readers—its value as more than a triumphant fulfillment of the *Defence's* didacticism, and more than a fictional illustration of the Protestant ideals to which Sidney was professionally and personally committed. We can find Sidney's fiction generative for different reasons than the sixteenth-century rhetoricians who mined his fiction for quotable maxims, and for different reasons than the seventeenth and eighteenth century readers who valued it as light

sentimental reading—as a book that, in Maurice Evans’ words, did not require too much “painful involvement.”⁸³ For readers who *value* painful involvement—as a theme treated within the fiction, and as a mode of readerly connection it invites—Sidney offers abundant accounts of familiar affective experiences including frustration, shame, feeling in over one’s head, and hating oneself too much to accept help or nourishment from those who seek to comfort you (as both Musidorus and Amphialus do in their parallel scenes of recovery).

For Virginia Woolf, these accounts of anxiety and self-division constitute exceptional ruptures in *Arcadia*: proto-modern moments when a “novelist’s” sensitive depictions of psychological struggle briefly flare up to the surface, violating the generic constraints of sixteenth-century romance. But I have tried to demonstrate that we should also regard these moments as historically specific. Elizabethan penitents aspired toward total transformation of the self even as they recognized that this transformation was ultimately impossible to finish; Daniel Dyke, the same minister who compares repentance to the miraculous transformation of stone to flesh, later claims that it is “yet an unperfect change.”⁸⁴ This paradox of Protestant experience resonates with Sidney’s effort to revise his romance, leaving us an unfinished work that John Florio called “perfect-unperfect.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Evans, “Introduction,” *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, 19.

⁸⁴ Dyke, *Sermon on Repentance* (London 1614), 111.

⁸⁵ Florio, *The Essayes or Morall, Politike and Militarie Discourses by Michel de Montaigne* (London, 1603), Dedication. Florio dedicated his translation of Montaigne’s essays to Sidney’s daughter Elizabeth and to Penelope Rich (the “Stella” of Sidney’s sonnet sequence). In his dedicatory letter to the two women, Florio refers to “that perfect-unperfect Arcadia, which all our world yet weeps with you, that your all praise-exceeding father...your worthy friend...lived not to mend or end-it: since this end we see of it, though at first above all, now is not answerable to the precedents.” Florio implicitly criticizes the Countess of Pembroke’s editorial choices in assembling the composite 1593 edition, accusing her of “more marring that was well, then mending what was amiss.”

The *New Arcadia*'s incompleteness is an accident of history, but Sidney's accounts of penitence within the romance illuminate the impossibility of completion as an important *topos* in post-Reformation culture. In the experimental space of Arcadia, Sidney undermines the Protestant ideal of self-transformation, but offers no stable alternative version of penitential or authorial completion in its place. Instead, Sidney's penitents succumb to despair, like Amphialus; or they move on without any assurance of forgiveness, like Musidorus sending his letter even as he remains painfully aware of its insufficiency.

Chapter 2: The Endless Work of Penitence in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyzes Edmund Spenser's exploration of penitence and self-remaking throughout *The Faerie Queene*, with particular focus on penitential episodes in Books One and Six: the regeneration of the Redcrosse Knight and the punishment of Mirabella, the scornful beauty, who has driven lovesick knights to their deaths. In these books, which are linked by their distinctive focus on regeneration, Spenser sustains an inquiry into several defining questions of post-Reformation penitence: How do we break free from the past, or at loosen its grip on our present identity and possibilities for action? Can we choose to repent? If so, how do we go about repenting, and what role do others have in the process? Spenser allegorizes the condition of "the deed's creature"—the sinner who becomes permanently overtaken and defined by her past sin—and imagines a variety of possible ways in which we might find release from this condition. This struggle to resist being defined by one's past actions engenders states of impasse analogous to the moments of paralysis and panic that William Oram and Jeff Dolven have described as characteristic features of *The Faerie Queene*.¹ The problems of initiative, sufficiency, and completion that troubled post-Reformation penitential theory influence Spenser's poem at the level of form as well as narrative content. Reading *The Faerie Queene* in the context of sixteenth-century penitential experience helps to

¹ See Oram, "Spenserian Paralysis," *SEL* 41.1 (Winter 2001): 49-70, and Dolven, "Panic's Castle," *Representations* 120.1 (2012): 1-16.

account for Spenser's recurring motifs of endlessness and reveals the complexity of his poem's engagement with post-Reformation religious controversies.²

Book One features the *Faerie Queene's* two best-known penitential episodes: the Redcrosse Knight's encounter with Despair in Canto Nine and his regeneration at the House of Holiness in Canto Ten. These well-known representations of penitence help to illuminate the theological and psychological stakes of Mirabella's penance, a more opaque, less widely studied episode. Redcrosse's experiences of despair and spiritual discipline follow his imprisonment in the House of Pride, and together they purge away the knight's sin and prepare him to emerge as a new man: Saint George, the Knight of Holiness. In this sequence, Spenser follows a long-standing literary tradition of Christian narratives in which a sinner moves through a sequence of pride, despair, repentance, and salvation.³ This tradition treats penitential suffering as a means toward the end of salvation: however debilitating that suffering may feel in the moment for characters like Everyman and the prodigal son, it

² Leading studies of Spenser and Christianity include Anthea Hume, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); John King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Darryl Gless, *Interpretation and Theology in Spenser* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Richard Mallette, *Spenser and the Discourses of Reformation England* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); and Carol Kaske, *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). For overviews of scholarship on Spenser and religion, see Andrew Hadfield, "Spenser and Religion – Yet Again," *SEL* 51.1 (Winter 2011), 21-46, and Anne Lake Prescott, "Complicating the Allegory: Spenser and Religion in Recent Scholarship," *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.4 (January 2001), 9-23; and Claire McEachern, "Spenser and Religion," *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ Andrew Escobedo, "Despair and the Proportion of the Self," *Spenser Studies* 17 (2003): 82. Escobedo compares Spenser's Despair episode to two earlier instances of this "pride-despair-salvation sequence," Richard Wever's interlude *Lusty Ivventus* and Nathaniel Woodes' 1581 allegorical play, *Conflict of Conscience* (76-77). Susan Snyder provides an overview of this narrative sequence in a variety of medieval and renaissance genres, including theological commentaries, legends, allegorical poetry, and morality plays; see "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition," *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 18-59.

ultimately transforms these characters for the better, motivates them to call for God's mercy, and thereby facilitates their movement towards redemption. In light of this traditional relationship between penitence and holiness, it is not surprising to find extended penitential episodes in the Legend dedicated to that virtue. But the punishment of Mirabella in Book Six does not align quite so intuitively with that book's central virtue, Courtesy.⁴ In this story, Spenser detaches penitence from traditions of monastic discipline and from the Christian literary conventions that govern Book One's penitential scenes, and he inserts it into a pastoral setting presided over by pagan gods.

Spenser places Mirabella in Book Six in order to imagine a model of penitence for the *saeculum*: the social world that Christians inhabit in the interval before the final reckoning of salvation and damnation. Within this world, people can never achieve a reformation so absolute as to leave their past transgressions, their victims, and their actions' damaging consequences behind; even the assurance of divine election could not wash these irreversible effects away. In the story of Mirabella's punishment—often dismissed as a shallow, superficial cartoon of Petrarchan frustration—Spenser imagines one way to live in this condition of irreversibility without resorting to moral evasion, resignation, or despair.

I argue that the Despair, House of Holiness, and Mirabella episodes each emphasize different entailments or outcomes of penitential pain. In Despair's cave, this pain engenders suicidal stasis; in the House of Holiness, it leads to renewal; and in the Mirabella episode, it

⁴ Jeff Dolven notes the disparity between Mirabella's punishment and the other scenes of attempted reform in Book Six. The emblematic pageantry of Mirabella's penance would seem better suited to Book Five, with its pattern of public humiliation and poetic justice, while her bag of repentance and bottle of contrite tears fit more readily into the religious allegory of Book One (*Instruction* 229).

gives rise to compassionate regard for others. The two penitential scenes featured in Book One set up opposed models of stasis and renewal. In the Legend of Courtesy, Spenser re-stages the conflict between these models in a secularized setting, where characters experience guilt, shame, and reform without access to the Christian ritual structures and consolations (such as the assurance that one is “chosen” for salvation) that shaped Redcrosse’s penitential sequence.⁵

As he reconfigures the stark conceptual models he had introduced in Book One, Spenser develops an innovative vision of penitence as a process of continuous effort and gradual self-transformation. This process is spatially and temporally unbound relative to Book One’s penitential sequence. It unfolds throughout the “world’s wide wilderness” rather than in the seclusion of a cave, hermitage, or hospital. Mirabella’s penance is also far less conclusive than the discipline of Redcrosse, who emerges “perfected” and “cured” from Caelia’s schoolhouse; indeed, it is so inconclusive that some critics find Mirabella essentially unchanged by the experience.⁶ But although Mirabella never arrives at the sense of perfection attained by Redcrosse, she is far from despairing. This episode suggests, then, that the extremes of despair and rebirth typically emphasized by Protestant theologians and by

⁵ Richard Mallette argues that the Legends of Courtesy and Holiness are intimately linked by their shared interest in moral regeneration and salvation. Book Six is more “pervaded with discourses of salvation” than any book since the first (*Discourses* 169), yet Spenser explores these theological questions in a relatively secularized setting. The afterlife, for instance, is “not at issue” anywhere in Book Six (177), and this book’s many scenes of rescue and deliverance are “notably secular,” effected by human effort and compassion rather than the intervention of divine grace (182).

⁶ Mallette, for example, claims that Mirabella “leaves the narrative as she entered it, enslaved to her chastisement despite her professions of remorse and her ‘compassion,’” feelings that are associated with regeneration elsewhere in this book (*Discourses*, 190). For Mallette, Mirabella’s compassion is basically inconsequential since it does not lead to a change in her situation as a prisoner.

Spenser's own Legend of Holiness are not the only possible outcomes for penitential experience. Spenser's exploration of penitence in the Legend of Courtesy confronts many of the same theological questions the poet had considered in his first book, but the model of penitence he adumbrates in Mirabella's story is more subtle—and, I will suggest, more applicable to the lived experience of penitence in the secular world—than either of those allegorized in Book One.

STASIS IN DESPAIR'S CAVE

In the conflict between pastoral retreat and heroic teleology that structures Spenser's romance, Despair is aligned with the former: he is a seductive figure who tempts knights to abandon their heroic quests.⁷ He capitalizes on the desire for rest that the poet himself voices in his moments of apocalyptic yearning for the "Sabbath's sight," the end of all action, change, and error. Despair is thus associated with the seductive bowers and pleasure gardens of Spenser's romance, even though his cave is suffused with horror and gloom rather than delight.

Despair voices the logic of the deed's creature, urging his listeners to settle themselves in what their acts have made them and give up on the possibility of acting differently in the future. This logic is allegorically reflected in his victims' physical symptoms: his rhetoric causes stupefaction, drains the blood from his victims' faces, and immobilizes

⁷ Patricia Parker describes this structuring tension of *The Faerie Queene* in *Inescapable Romance*, 54-113. She notes that Despair's rhetoric plays upon Redcrosse's desire for rest from labor and weary wandering: "The argument for suicide is an appeal for *quies* where the 'travel' of continued wandering is inseparable from its root meaning of 'travail'" (87).

their bodies.⁸ Despair inflicts a condition of stone-like stasis in which his listener becomes fixed into place, paralyzed by the overwhelming recollection of his own “deformed crimes” (48.6) and unable to conceive of a future apart from them.

Redcrosse learns of Despair in Canto Nine, when he and Una encounter a knight riding frantically towards them with a hemp noose tied around his neck. The knight, Trevisan, has narrowly escaped from Despair’s cave, but not before taking on some of the demon’s own physical characteristics: he looks wan and lifeless (1.9.22) and is “senseless and aghast” (23.3). Trevisan is initially too astonished to speak, but he finally manages a faltering account of his escape from Despair. He recounts that his companion Terwin loved a proud lady who, like Mirabella, “joy’ed to see her lover languish and lament” (27.9). Trevisan himself is also languishing for unknown reasons: in 29 he refers to “our feeble harts.” After hearing the two companions describe their suffering, Despair “pluck[s] from [them] all hope of dew relieve” (29.6), and offers them a rope and knife. Terwin stabs himself, and Trevisan flees the cave, terrified by the sight of his friend’s suicide.

Redcrosse comes to the hollow cave under a craggy cliff where Despair sits musing silently, hollow eyes staring out “as astound” from his emaciated face. When Redcrosse challenges Despair, the “man of hell” invokes both justice and mercy to justify driving Terwin to his death: justice demands that “he should die, who merits not to live” (38.3-4), but handing Terwin the knife was also an act of mercy, since it provided the knight with “eternal rest and happy ease, which thou dost want and crave” (40). Playing upon

⁸ On Spenserian stounds, astonishment, and stupefaction, see Giulio Pertile, “‘And all his sences stound’: The Physiology of Stupefaction in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*,” *English Literary Renaissance* (2014): 420-451.

Redcrosse's temptation to rest at ease, Despair compares death to sleep, a harbor, and respite after hard toil (40.8-9). Redcrosse offers rebuttals to each of Despair's rhetorical assaults, but his defenses weaken when Despair addresses the knight's own sinfulness and arouses his sense of guilt.

Despair argues that once a man has sinned, he can only continue sinning: he admits of no possibility of changing one's behavior. The possibility of *metanoia* and amendment of life that follows the acknowledgment of one's sinfulness in Protestant conscience literature is absent from Despair's rhetoric, which holds that longer life can lead only to more sin and punishment:

The lenger life, I wote the greater sin,
The greater sin, the greater punishment:
All those great battels, which thou boasts to win,
Through strife, and blood-shed, and avengement,
Now praysd, hereafter deare thou shalt repent:
For life must life, and blood must blood repay.
Is not enough thy evil life forespent?
For he, that once hath missed the right way,
The further he doth go, the further he doth stray. (1.9.43)

In this stanza, Despair not only reminds Redcrosse of his failures to live up to heroic ideals, but disparages the ideals themselves: they are bloody and sinful, and will cause Redcrosse to "repent" hereafter. Despair's use of the term "repent" refers to regret and remorse, but he divorces the term from any sense of the salutary, transformative effects that Protestant divines attribute to repentance. For him, repentance consists only of critical retrospection: Erasmus's "look back" without any corresponding alteration of life. (Spenser emphasizes Despair's ability to fix his victims in a backward-looking position from the moment when he introduces Trevisan on horseback: he rides forward, but "his eye [is] backward cast" [21.5].)

The thought that continued motion can only lead him further astray is demoralizing for Redcrosse, and not only because of the prospect of punitive torments after death.

Despair follows his general prediction of punishment for sin by calling attention to Una, who stands quietly by throughout this exchange, and forcing Redcrosse to recall how he has betrayed her (46.6-9). The recognition that he has broken his faith with Una and “sold himself” to Duessa becomes too painful for Redcrosse to bear:

The knight was much enmoved with his speech,
That as a sword's point through his hart did perse,
And in his conscience made a secret breach,
Well knowing trew all, that he did rehearse,
And to his fresh remembraunce did reverse,
The ugly vew of his deformed crimes,
That all his manly powers it did disperse,
As he were charmed with inchaunted rimes,
That oftentimes he quaked, and fainted oftentimes. (49.1-9)

Spenser adheres to literary and religious convention in presenting faith in “greater grace” as the solution to despair; this conclusion is consistent with both Catholic and Protestant doctrines. But practical action and love also help to deliver Redcrosse from the tempter. Una assures Redcrosse that he is “chosen,” but she also reminds him that he serves social and political forces greater than his individual self. When the knight is tempted to become utterly passive, giving himself over to the seductive rhetoric of Despair, Una’s enraged question—“Is this the battaile, which thou vaunts to fight/ With that fire-mouthed Dragon, horrible and bright?” (52.8-9)—invokes his commitment to her and his vow to Gloriana in order to galvanize him back into an active state. But between the two extremes of heroic action and passive abjection lies a middle ground much emphasized by Protestant divines: *endurance*, the experience of voluntarily accepting and bearing affliction. Before

Redcrosse can resume knightly action in the world, or even restore faith in his own capacity for such action, he needs to experience passivity at the House of Holiness, where he will learn to admit his individual weakness and lack of self-sufficiency.

Una's words to Redcrosse, then, rebuke his selfishness: by allowing Despair to overtake him, she reminds him, he has forgotten his commitments to others.⁹ Yet Spenser perceives that suicide is not always or only a self-centered choice, a matter of escaping from one's own suffering. For a character convinced that he is stuck in an unalterable pattern of destructive actions—that all he can possibly do is go on hurting others—then suicide may feel like an ethical choice, a way to spare others further harm at his hands. (This is, I suggest, a key motivation for Amphialus's abortive suicide attempt in Sidney's *New Arcadia*.) From this point of view, what a suicidal person needs most urgently is not faith that he will be saved after death—that is, the faith that Una offers to Redcrosse—but faith in his own ability to change *within this life*, so that his future conduct need not be limited to the compulsive repetition of past offenses. The House of Holiness opens this possibility of self-transformation to Redcrosse, but in an unearthly and idealized form that Spenser will later revise in the Legend of Courtesy. The kind of personal transformation Redcrosse endures in this House is nothing short of the Pauline *metanoia* glorified by Protestant conscience literature: destruction of the old man and rebirth as a new man.

⁹ Recall the narcissism that goes hand-in-hand with Amphialus's self-condemnation in Sidney's *New Arcadia*: it takes an inflated sense of self-importance to regard oneself as "worthier of punishment than any other man." The isolating self-obsession of suicidal characters is the focus of Eric Langley's recent study, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

RENEWAL IN THE HOUSE OF HOLINESS

Spenser's allegory of the House of Holiness explores the role of penitence in the quest for godliness. To what extent do the knight's trials, both in Despair's cave and under Penance's repetitive iron whip, prepare him to become the regenerate Saint George? Book One combines features of the saint's life and the chivalric romance,¹⁰ emphasizing the period of trial and suffering that a knight must endure in order to atone for his sins and achieve the self-transformation that will enable to return to the world, profoundly altered.¹¹ But modeling his epic on saints' lives and chivalric romances of atonement would have been a controversial choice for a Protestant poet of Spenser's generation. Moreover, the logic of sequence I've just described—he must endure in order to be regenerated—implies a value for human choice, work, and suffering at odds with Calvinist statements on the total corruption of the human spirit and the worthlessness of human works, including penitence.¹² Spenser's allegory of penance thus participates in broader post-Reformation debates about the value of human works and the freedom of the human will to participate in its own salvation.

In addition to questions of initiative (can the sinner voluntarily repent, or can only God initiate his repentance? Is all the agency God's, "both power and eke will"?), Spenser

¹⁰ On medieval romances that conjoin these two traditions, see Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 10.

¹¹ This sequence characterizes the four Middle English romances that Hopkins isolates as a distinct group, the "penitential romances" (20). See also Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 87, on medieval "romances of atonement."

¹² Anne Lake Prescott notes this tension between denigration and affirmation of the value of works in "Complicating the Allegory," 10 and 13. Darryl Gless finds these apparently conflicting attitudes reconcilable: *Theology and Interpretation*, 11.

confronts a second crux of post-Reformation controversy: is penance an utterly internal process, or does it involve material and physical practices? This question is at issue in critical debates over the House of Holiness, where the Redcrosse Knight is rehabilitated in a surprisingly monastic setting; scholars have long disagreed over the extent to which apparently Catholic features of this House, including rosary beads, ashes, sackcloth, and the presence of a personification named Penance, should be interpreted as literal forms of discipline or as figurative signs of an internal process.

Critics who insist that these elements must be intended figuratively proceed from the assumption that Spenser, a devout Protestant, must deny humans' capacity to influence their own salvation. For these readers, including John King and Anthony Low, Spenser's depictions of physical penitential discipline must be understood either as anti-Catholic satire or as symbolic of purely inward spiritual reflection, which they take as a distinguishing characteristic of Protestant Christianity (as though inner contrition were not also a crucial element of Catholic penance). Thus Low explains the surprising presence of ashes and sackcloth at the House of Holiness by concluding that while Corceca, a Catholic caricature who appears earlier in Book One, uses these objects in an "outward and literal" way, Caelia's use of them is strictly "inward and spiritual."¹³ Low overlooks Spenser's tendency to frustrate precisely this sort of clear opposition. He makes this distinction with a level of confidence that the poet repeatedly denies to his characters in Book 1; as Helen Cooper

¹³ Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2003), 76.

wryly observes, Spenser's characters can "never be quite sure whether a traditional religious image is going to turn out to be inward and spiritual or outward and papist."¹⁴

Others argue for a more moderate view: that Spenser accorded some measure of value to penitential works, and that leading reformers also did so. As Claire McEachern writes, "even Calvinism...came close to acknowledging the collaborative nature of human salvation, such that works were not merely indicative of faith" but constitutive of it. Reforming the self seems primarily an "affective, interior project," yet "the rather traditional nature of Redcrosse's penitential regime...seems to suggest that good works matter in some way, even if it is not exactly clear how."¹⁵ For Darryl Gless, a metaphoric reading of the House of Holiness makes it possible to reconcile apparently incongruous features of the episode. "If the House of Holiness is viewed as a metaphoric representation of Protestant doctrines of holiness," Gless writes, Spenser may be found to imply "that works in this world are important, admirable...and yet contribute nothing to justification."¹⁶

While Protestant theologians reduced the sacramental value of "outward" acts of penance, many retained a commitment to the mortification of the flesh (through temperance, abstinence, and the suffering of a grieved conscience) and valued outward shows as a way to "manifest" remorse before God and man. Calvin's writing on the use of sackcloth and ashes accords some value to "outward" penitential practices, provided that these are considered secondary to the inner experience of "rending the heart":

¹⁴ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.

¹⁵ McEachern, "Spenser and Religion," 43-44.

¹⁶ Gless, *Interpretation and Theology*, 150. This metaphoric view includes perceiving inhabitants and features of House of Holiness as "signs of grace's justifying presence" (ibid.)

The outward practice of penance must not become the chief thing. Some persons, when they hear weeping, fasting, and ashes spoken of in various passages, and especially in Joel [2:12], consider that repentance consists chiefly in fasting and weeping. This delusion of theirs must be removed. What is there said concerning the rending not of garments but of the heart, belongs properly to repentance.¹⁷

Nonetheless, he continues, there are occasions when it is "very suitable" for sinners to use outward shows of misery to "manifest their sorrow" to God and man. When called to trial for our sins, sinners may weep and fast as a way of begging God to reduce the severity of their sentence, "just as an accused man is wont to present himself as a suppliant with long beard, uncombed hair, and mourner's clothing to move the judge to mercy."

In the Despair episode, Spenser shows how penitence can engender stasis and self-destruction. The House of Holiness represents an opposite extreme: penitence that leads to regeneration, purposeful pain that perfects the sufferer and strips his impurities away. The proem to Canto Nine invites readers to expect a straightforward process of learning and orientation, announcing that Redcrosse "is taught repentaunce,/and the way to heavenly blesse." But the notion of repentance as a teachable practice coexists uneasily with the notion of repentance as a divine gift. This incongruity troubles the whole genre of conscience literature, which existed for the purpose of teaching readers how to repent but also affirmed that, theologically speaking, repentance could only be initiated by the motion of divine grace.

Una leads Redcrosse to the House of Holiness when she perceives that his encounter with Despair has left him too weakened and exhausted to continue his quest. The House is part hospital, part "schoolehouse," and part penitentiary, complete with a dungeon-like "low

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.611.

darksome place” where Redcrosse will be tortured with hot pincers and iron whips. Una entrusts the knight into the care of Fidelia, whose sacred book can “kill, and raise again to life the hart, that she did thrill.” As Fidelia reads to him, Redcrosse begins to hate himself and the world. But this self-hatred, which indicated weakness and a shameful dispersal of Redcrosse’s “manly powers” in Despair’s cave, is transfigured here into an indication of his “perfection”:

The faithful knight now grew in little space
To such perfection of all heavenly grace;
That wretched world he gan for to abhore,
And mortal life gan loath...
So much the dart of sinful guilt the soul dismays. (21)

Speranza offers the knight some comfort, but he remains in “distressed doubtful agony, / Disdaining life, desiring leave to die” (22). Una sees his distress and is “assailed with great perplexity” (22.9). Una has brought Redcrosse here herself and subjected him to the ladies’ tuition, but she appears surprised and unsettled by the way this sequence progresses. Her perplexity stands in for that of Spenser’s readers, who may well wonder at this moment why Redcrosse’s “perfection” lands him right back in a state of despair.

Caelia is “well acquainted with that commune plight, which sinful horror works in wounded heart” (23). She gives Una comfort, counsel and advice (though Spenser’s qualifying phrase, “all, that she might,” acknowledges limits to the comfort she can provide). Caelia sends for Patience, the leach who can cure a “grieved conscience” using methods drawn from medieval penitential manuals and Protestant conscience literature.¹⁸ The knight

¹⁸ Beth Quitslund describes Patience’s connection to sixteenth-century Protestant texts that presented despair as both a medical and a spiritual condition in “Despair and the Composition of the Self,” *Spenser Studies* 17 (2003): 91-106. See especially 100-103 on

first has to be persuaded to “tell his grief” to Patience.¹⁹ Next, the leach applies salves and medicines, plus “words of wondrous might,” “by which to ease he him recurred brief” (23.7).²⁰ Redcrosse still suffers after this, but endures his pain more comfortably, “as seeming now more light.”²¹ Sin still rankles within him like an infection, so Patience lays him down in a “darksome lowly place” to undertake a more intensive surgery.

In ashes and sackcloth he did array
His daintie corse, proud humors to abate,
And dieted with fasting every day,
The swelling of his wounds to mitigate,
And made him pray both earely and eke late:
And euer as superfluous flesh did rot
Amendment readie still at hand did wayt,
To pluck it out with pincers firie whot,
That soone in him was left no one corrupted iot.

And bitter *Penance* with an yron whip,
Was wont him once to disple every day:
And sharpe *Remorse* his hart did pricke and nip,
That drops of bloud thence like a well did play;
And sad *Repentance* vsed to embay
His blameful bodie in salt water sore,
The filthy blots of sinne to wash away.
So in short space they did to health restore
The man that would not lue, but earst lay at deathes dore. (26-27)

Patience’s use of the “cures” recommended by “physicians of conscience” like Richard Greenham and William Perkins. See also Anthea Hume, *Protestant Poet*, 98-101.

¹⁹ A.C. Hamilton’s edition glosses “tell his grief” (24.2) as a reference to confession, which is “necessary for salvation but being private is only preliminary to godly deeds,” and interprets lines 6-9 as a reference to “absolution.” But perhaps Patience is exactly what sinners need more urgently in a regime that *does not* include formal confession and absolution. Since the sinner cannot hear anyone pronounce him absolved here below, Patience enables him to endure until his final judgment.

²⁰ “Ease” may signal a connection between the House of Holiness and Despair; upon arrival at the House, Redcrosse sleeps in an “easy bed” (17.7).

²¹ On endurance as a form of heroism, see Georgia Ronan Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures: Action and Suffering in Chaucer and Spenser* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

Redcrosse is almost entirely passive in these stanzas. He is the subject of one verb—“he his pain *endur’d*”—but this verb itself stresses his movement into a state of passivity, submitting himself as a patient to the external forces that torment and regenerate him. Spenser insists on the pain, the difficulty, and the self-diminishing, even devastating, effects of penitence. Even a sinner who knows he is in the right place, being punished for his own good, cries and roars with pain during the experience itself: “his torment often was so great,/ that like a lyon he would cry and rore,/ and rend his flesh, and his own sinews eat” (28) Una grieves so much at his suffering that she tears her hair and clothes, “Yet all with patience wisely she did beare; for well she wist, his crime could never else be cleare” (28.8-9).²² Spenser repeatedly shows the pain and protraction of penitential suffering, but then reminds us that it is all for a salutary purpose.

As a “schoolhouse” and hospital, the House of Holiness invites readers to expect some sort of development: instruction or treatment that progresses cumulatively, purgation that proceeds until not one corrupted jot remains. Redcrosse passes through his series of treatments like inert matter on a conveyor belt, receiving discipline and consolation from Fidelia, Speranza, Patience, Amendment, Penance, Repentance, and Remorse, Charissa, Mercy, the Seven Beadsmen, and finally Contemplation. The size and diversity of this cast of characters, each equipped with her own specialized tools (from sacred books to hot pincers), suggests that each personification will have a distinctive role to play in the process, each moving Redcrosse one step closer to holiness. Jeff Dolven argues that the House of

²² This line introduces legal concepts into the otherwise medicinal language of the House of Holiness. This is the first time Spenser mentions that Redcrosse is here to “clear” a “crime,” in addition to the more frequently named purpose of restoring and healing himself. His punishment turns out to be vindictive as well as medicinal.

Holiness seems as if it should unfold as a narrative: a *story* of personal development that proceeds in stages.²³ But in the course of Redcrosse's treatment, this sequence becomes increasingly unclear. As Darryl Gless observes, Redcrosse is repeatedly described as restored, "cured" (29), "recovered" (29), or "perfected." Each statement of completion—such as "shortly therein so perfect he became, ...in holy righteousness, without rebuke or blame" (45.6-9)—is followed by the discovery that Redcrosse still needs to go back for more discipline.²⁴ In addition to the multiple endpoints Gless points out, Redcrosse's transformation also has multiple beginnings: he "gan" to loathe his life, though he already did so in Despair's cave (21); Patience "gan apply relief," though Speranza has already administered "comfort sweet" just three stanzas earlier. As Redcrosse's disciplinary program loops back upon itself, characters' roles in the process begin to overlap; for example, Una introduces Redcrosse to Charissa who "schools" him in "virtuous rules" (32), repeating a nearly identical handoff to his first schoolmaster Fidelia (18).

Spenser registers the wearying effect of this repetitive discipline in his descriptions of Redcrosse's bodily frailty, which persists even at moments when he is fresh from his latest round of perfecting. As Redcrosse and Una ascend the steep and painful slope toward the hermitage where Contemplation resides, the knight is so "fraile" and "weary" that he cannot gain the summit without her help (47.8-9), though he has only just been released from his interval of resting and recovering "awhile" with the Seven Beadsmen (45.1). The knight's weariness coincides with the exhaustion of Spenser's own poetic materials; this is, after all, the third straight and narrow path that Redcrosse has traversed since his arrival (5.9, 35.2-3),

²³ *Scenes of Instruction*, 142-3.

²⁴ Gless, *Interpretation and Theology*, 155-163.

and Contemplation will reveal yet another such path, this one pointing toward the New Jerusalem, before the canto is done.

Contemplation promises to show Redcrosse this final heavenly road, “the way” that “after labors long, and sad delay,” brings travelers to “joyous rest” and “endless bliss” (52.5-6). “But first,” he adds, “thou must a season fast and pray, /till from her bands the spright assoiled is, /and have her strength recurred from frail infirmities” (52.7-9). By this point, Redcrosse is exhausted—an effect that Spenser is surely seeking to create for readers as well. Is Contemplation calling for yet another delay, announcing another round of purification that Redcrosse must endure? For a moment, we cannot be sure, since Redcrosse has been cured and recured so many times already. But the next stanza begins, “That done, he leads him to the highest Mount,” leaving us to conclude either that Redcrosse passes a quick season with Contemplation in the space between stanzas, or that the holy man was referring to the treatment he had already undertaken.

How much time does Redcrosse spend at the House of Holiness? How long does it take to clear a crime or cure a wounded conscience? Spenser deliberately makes this question difficult to answer. At some moments he presents Redcrosse’s cure as brief and contained: his renewal is achieved “soon” (26.9), within a “short space” (27.8) or a “little space” (21). But elsewhere, he incorporates suggestions of a repeated daily routine: Redcrosse fasts “every day” (26.3), Amendment “still at hand did wait” (26.7), Penance beats him once a day (27.2), and Repentance “used to embay” his body in cleansing tears. His torment “often” is great enough to make him roar with pain, and Una pities him “evermore.” These phrases dilate the “short space” of Canto 10 into an unspecified interval in which penance happens

to the knight over and over—still, often, evermore. The House’s spatial dimensions, too, are mysterious; it initially appears as a castle with heavy iron gates barred against external enemies, but it opens out into a sprawling landscape linked by numerous straight and narrow paths. Redcrosse is repeatedly guided onto an arduous road towards a glittering ideal, a heavenly destination that will retrospectively prove all that suffering to have been worthwhile. Una often reminds him of this destination; when Contemplation asks “to what end they clomb that tedious hight” (49.9), she replies, “What end...could cause us take such pain,/ but...high heaven to attaine?” (50.1-3). This is, finally, the logic of the House of Holiness—pain as a means to a salvific end—but Spenser’s temporal language undermines that logic. The teleology of Redcrosse’s renewal, like every other heroic project in *The Faerie Queene*, is subject to romance deferral and dilation. But unlike the pleasurable diversions that often delay the fulfillment of a knightly quest, this deferral is “tedious,” exacting a physical and spiritual toll on the characters who experience it.

I have argued that Book One elaborates two opposed models of penitential experience. For Despair, penance is pointless, since no amount of effort can stop us from continuing to sin and incur punishment. In the darkness of Despair’s cave, both divine mercy and personal transformation fall from view, and only the devastating pain of remorse remains. In the House of Holiness, penance is restorative. It leads to a cure, perfection, and the ability to “cherish” oneself; it has a defined endpoint. As in medieval romances of atonement, penance in this allegorical space involves temporary withdrawal from action in the world.

Yet we have already begun to see how this general opposition starts to unravel within Book One. The allegory of the House of Holiness promises an ideal of penance as time-bound and localized, like a medical procedure that issues in a definitive cure within a “short” span of time. But Spenser’s play with temporal language works against this ideal: penance begins to look instead like a spatially and temporally ambiguous experience that resists sequential narration, repeats itself, and begins and ends multiple times, so that all claims of finality (such as “cured” and “recovered” [29.1]) become dubious. This tension is partly a reflection of the Reformation’s effect on penance. Penance at the House of Holiness lies somewhere between sacramental ritual and faith-alone personal regeneration, incorporating some elements of each. But it is not just that the expectation of narrative progress aligns with the Catholic sacrament while Protestant doctrine troubles that expectation. Rather, the tension between these modes exists as a problem *within* Protestant discourse. Writers of practical divinity presented repentance alternately as a singular, definitive conversion into a new creature *and* as a lifelong experience of suffering that must be continuously renewed.

The House of Holiness reactivates the corrosive hatred of self and world that drove Redcrosse to suicide in Despair’s cave. In some ways, the allegory of despair is the less distressing of the two. If Despair frightens a knight, he can run away, as Trevisan did; his space is not so heavily guarded and enclosed as the House of Holiness, where Redcrosse is both prisoner and guest—both “laid in easy bed” and constrained in a torture chamber. Una can offer decisive comfort and rescue to Redcrosse in Despair’s cave. Despair is a localized enemy. Like the Blatant Beast and Error, he concentrates an abstraction—here, self-loathing—into a concrete figure. Faerie characters cannot kill this figure, but at least they can

run from his cave and leave him behind. The House of Holiness is the poem's first signal that Despair, in fact, cannot be so readily concentrated or left behind. It is much harder to separate oneself from despair when this emotion stops being concentrated into a haggard demon in a craggy cave and shifts into a psychological state, one that troubles the sinner even (and especially) during the process of healing and regeneration.

As Despair's logic creeps into the House of Holiness, and Redcrosse's apparently sequential healing process comes to resemble Despair's repeated and futile efforts to destroy himself, Spenser suggests that damnable despair and holy regeneration are not so starkly opposed after all—at least, not as these are experienced by the penitent himself. This weakening distinction anticipates Spenser's even more eclectic fusion of penitential models in the Mirabella episode. In this secular revision of his earlier and more overtly Christian allegories, Spenser reimagines penitence not as a suicidal dead end or a temporary infection to be cured, but as an ongoing condition of human experience.

POETIC PUNISHMENTS

The two models I have aligned with Despair and Holiness, stasis and renewal, correspond to two extreme possibilities for living with one's sinfulness: reduction to a single defining characteristic ("the deed's creature"), or rebirth as an utterly "new creature." In Spenser's Ovidian imagination, this reduction is often associated with freezing and hardening: metamorphosis that at once punishes the sinner and turns him into an immobile monument to his past sin, draining him of human identity and (hence) of possibilities for growth, learning, and changed behavior. This is precisely the kind of metamorphosis that

befalls one of Mirabella's most important literary predecessors: Anaxarete, the cruel and scornful woman who undergoes a moralized transformation into a statue in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.²⁵

Like the story of Mirabella's punishment—which the narrator presents as an “ensample” to warn female readers against cruelty—the story of Anaxarete is an embedded cautionary tale, told for the purpose of coercing a resistant woman. In the fourteenth book of the *Metamorphoses*, the god Vertumnus attempts to seduce Pomona, who has refused his love in the past. Disguised as an old woman, Vertumnus enters Pomona's orchard and attempts to win her over. He points to the intertwined union of a vine and an elm tree, each complementing the other: “If this elm without the vine did single stand, it should have nothing (saving leaves) to be desired... Yet art thou not admonished by example of this tree/ to take a husband, neither dost thou pass to married be” (14.758-763). Next, he proclaims his own worthiness and his passionate devotion to her, pleading, “Have mercy on his fervent love” (794). He shifts into scare tactics: “fear the god that may revenge, as Venus, who doth hate/ hard-hearted folks” (795-6). Finally, he tells Pomona the exemplary story of Anaxarete, “which, being rightly scanned,/ may easily bow [her] hardened heart and make it for to yield” (800-801).

²⁵ All citations refer to Book Fourteen of Arthur Golding's 1567 translation: *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). To my knowledge, no commentators have linked the story of Mirabella to that of Anaxarete. Recent studies of Ovidian metamorphoses in Spenser include Michael Stapleton, *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009); Syrithe Pugh, *Spenser and Ovid* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Raphael Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses, 1567-1632* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 80-141; and Colin Burrow, “Original Fictions: Metamorphoses in *The Faerie Queene*,” in *Ovid Renewed*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99-119.

Vertumnus's tale begins with Iphis, a man of low degree who falls in love with the high-born Lady Anaxarete. He sends her passionate letters, hangs garlands soaked with tears on the threshold of her home, and lingers outside her gate in increasing desperation, but these displays only heighten Anaxarete's scorn. Golding's translation uses images of softness and hardness, flesh and stone, to highlight the contrast between Iphis's "tender" vulnerability and the lady's unrelenting cruelty:

Ofttimes *his tender sides* he laid
Against *the threshold hard* and oft in sadness did upbraid
The lock with much ungentleness. The lady, crueler
Than are the rising narrow seas or falling Kids and far
More hard than steel of Noricum and than the stony rock
That in the quarry hath his root, did him despise and mock.
Beside her doings merciless of stateliness and spite,
She, adding proud and scornful words, defrauds the wretched wight
Of very hope. (813-23)

Iphis, "unable anymore/ to bear the torment of his grief" (823-4), stands at her gate and delivers a bitter, wounded farewell: "Well, steely-hearted, well, rejoice! Compelled yet shalt thou be/ of somewhat in me for to have a liking.... And in the end thou shalt confess the great desert of me" (831-4). On the same posts where he once left garlands as tokens of his love, he ties a noose to hang himself: "Thou cruel and ungodly wight, these are the wreaths that may/ Most pleasure thee" (850-1). Iphis's suicide is prolonged and painful to behold: he totters "wretchedly" with "strangled throat," and his scrambling feet kick the gate open, revealing him to Anaxarete's household servants, who shriek in terror and try in vain to lift him up.

When Iphis' corpse is carried through town to be buried, the procession passes Anaxarete's home, and the sound of his funeral music reaches "the ears of her whom God already gan/to strike" (863-4).

Scarce had she well on Iphis looked that on the bier did lie
But that her eyes waxed stark and from her limbs the blood gan fly.
Instead thereof came paleness in. And as she backward was
In mind to go, her feet stick fast and could not stir. And as
She would have cast her count'nance back, she could not do it. And
The stony hardness which alate did in her stomach stand
Within a while did overgrow her whole from sole to crown.
And lest you think this gear surmised, even yet in Salamin town
Of Lady Anaxarete the image standeth plain.
The temple also in the which the image doth remain
Is unto Venus consecrate by name of Looker-Out.
And therefore, weighing well these things, I pray thee, look about,
Good lady, and away with pride; and be content to frame
Thyself to him that loveth thee and cannot quench his flame. (866-80)

Like the series of tragic revelations that temporarily "astonish" and immobilize Amphialus in Sidney's *New Arcadia*, this recognition comes too late for Anaxarete to act upon it. She wishes she could look away and step back from the sight, but her feet are frozen in place; if she felt any compassion or remorse, she would be equally unable to act on those responses. Her cruelty is irreversible; she does not have an opportunity to think again and yield.

In this moment of recognition, Anaxarete shows symptoms like those of Despair's victims—blood drains from her limbs, and she becomes overtaken by the stoniness that was within her all along. Turning into a statue is not just an instance of poetic justice (that is, a fitting punishment for Anaxarete's stony behavior), but a natural extension of the life she already lived. In stories like Anaxarete's, Leonard Barkan writes, "the statue into which life has been frozen is not merely a conclusion to a story; it is an essence of that life, and, more important, it is to those of us who perceive the sculpture an unchanging sign of that

essence.”²⁶ This reduction to an unchanging sign of one defining essence constitutes another version of the static, deadening condition Spenser associates with Despair. Anaxarete is her deed’s creature in a staggeringly literal sense. Her stony treatment of Iphis freezes her into a lifeless, motionless memorial of past hard-heartedness. She stands for stasis, punishment that is only punitive (not rehabilitative), punishment that is a dead end for moral action. She cannot change; she can only warn others. When Spenser presents Mirabella as an example, he is conjuring the ghosts of women like Anaxarete and the purgatorial shades of medieval tales, all of whom have lost their final opportunities to repent. Comparison to this Ovidian cruel beauty illuminates the newfound compassion that allows Mirabella to become more than a monument of hard-heartedness.

As a didactic fiction embedded within the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Anaxarete is instantly effective for its intended audience. Just after narrating the cruel woman’s transformation, Vertumnus sheds his disguise and reveals himself to Pomona, who is suddenly “caught in love with beauty of his face” and yields to his advances. But when Spenser narrates the punishment of his hard-hearted beauty, he removes this sense of didactic efficacy: no woman within *The Faerie Queene* is moved or persuaded by Mirabella’s example. Spenser shares Ovid’s concern with the disfiguring, immobilizing effects of cruelty and pride, but he revises Ovid’s tale by removing its didactic frame in order to foreground the offender’s own experience.

²⁶ Barkan, “‘Living Sculptures’: Ovid, Michelangelo, and *The Winter’s Tale*,” *English Literary History* 48.4 (1981): 646. As Barkan notes, Anaxarete’s exemplary function is twofold: she is kept as a sculpture in Venus’s temple as a “threat to those who deny Venus,” and Vertumnus frames her as an instructive example for his listener Pomona.

What if Anaxarete had a chance to live on after Iphis's death?²⁷ What if she had found a chance to repent or pay for her cruelty, rather than being hardened into a cautionary statue for display in Venus's temple? This is the possibility that Spenser explores in Book Six. In the Mirabella episode, Spenser redirects the magic of metamorphosis away from the offender herself. Rather than becoming frozen in place, Mirabella is in constant motion, subjecting her conspicuously vulnerable and tender flesh to painful afflictions, while the personifications of Scorn and Disdain who attend her take on stony and metallic qualities.

Spenser draws many features of Mirabella's penance, including her physical discomfort, depleted beauty, ragged clothes, and emaciated horse, from a tradition of medieval narratives that depict Cupid's punishment of scornful women in the afterlife. The early twentieth-century scholar W.A. Neilsson locates this motif, which he labels "the purgatory of cruel beauties," in three representative texts: Andreas Capellanus' *The Art of Courthy Love*, John Gower's "Tale of Rosiphelee" from *Confessio Amantis*, and an anonymous thirteenth-century Breton lay, known as the *Lai du Trot*.²⁸ In each of these texts, a living person encounters the ghost of a beautiful woman who is subjected to eternal torments

²⁷ Shakespeare pursues a similar question in *The Winter's Tale*, a romance revision of tragic dramas of irreversibility. Othello kills himself upon realizing what he has done to Desdemona, but Shakespeare's romance explores what might have transpired if Othello had stayed alive after causing his wife's death. What kinds of penitential practice would make it possible for such an offender to go on living with himself?

²⁸ See W.A. Neilson, "The Purgatory of Cruel Beauties: a Note on the Sources of the 8th Novel in the 5th Day of the *Decameron*," *Romania* 29 (1900): 85-93. For a more recent discussion of these narratives, see Paul Battles, "In folly ripe, in reason rotten: *The Flower and the Leaf* and the 'Purgatory of Cruel Beauties,'" *Medium Aevum* 72.2 (2003): 238-258. Citations in this section refer to Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courthy Love*, ed. Jon Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell Peck (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); and *Three Old French Narrative Lays: Trot, Lecheor, Nabaret*, trans. Glyn Burgess and Leslie Brook (Liverpool Online Series: Critical Editions of French Texts, 1999), 13-44.

because she scorned her lovers and refused marriage during her lifetime. As in Mirabella's case, these torments unfold during an emblematic procession on horseback. Loving women who submitted to Cupid's law wear sumptuous clothing and ride comfortably on well-fed horses, accompanied by helpful attendants. Scornful beauties bring up the rear, riding at a painful trot without saddles astride lean, galled nags.

The details of these women's punishments vary, but all three texts emphasize their bodily (specifically genital) suffering, the public spectacle of their humiliation, and the impossibility of release. They do not turn to stone, but they fare little better than Anaxarete. Like Ovid's cruel beauty, these medieval offenders against Cupid's law end up reduced to exemplars, their movements severely constrained and compelled by the didactic message they represent. Each narrative concludes with a didactic scene in which a penitent rider explains her offense and urges her listener to pass her story on as a lesson to scornful women, who will suffer similarly drastic punishments if they fail to change their ways before it is too late. "Let living women take care," warns a penitent beauty in Capellanus's version, "since after they are dead no penance can be of any use to them."²⁹

The ghostly women featured in these medieval narratives of Cupid's punishment are condemned to suffer eternally for their crimes. Unlike the souls in Dante's *Purgatorio* or other accounts of Purgatory, these women have no chance of eventual release into Paradise. Their suffering does not pay down the debt of their sins, purify and reform them, or otherwise prepare them to ascend into a more peaceful afterlife; it serves only to hurt the offenders themselves and provide a vivid warning for others. Like Mirabella, who "repented late"

²⁹ Capellanus, *The Art of Courty Love*, 76.

(6.8.2.9), these women repent only after Cupid has condemned them—at which point their change of heart can do nothing to mitigate their punishment.³⁰ Fixed into place in their horseback pageants and laden with emblematic markers, these shades are doomed to eternally signify their own transgressions; they can never hope to be identified as anything other than exemplars of feminine scorn.

Critics frequently describe Mirabella's story as no more than a rehearsal or parody of stock medieval literary conventions. For example, Tonkin identifies the "purgatory of cruel beauties" motif as part the "stock poetic material" that comprises Mirabella's story, but he does not acknowledge Spenser's numerous departures from it.³¹ But Spenser reconfigures his source material in ways that interpreters of this episode have not acknowledged: Mirabella is still alive; she undergoes her penance alone, rather than as part of a pageant that visually contrasts her shame to other women's virtue; she is accompanied by Scorn and Disdain, who personify her own faults; and she carries bags of contrition and repentance, which import Christian concepts into the pagan setting of Cupid's court. Most importantly, Spenser omits the didactic frame of these stories, as of Ovid's: he does not include a scene in which the cruel beauty's punishment successfully persuades other women to submit to their lovers. In aggregate, these revisions shift emphasis away from Mirabella's instructive role as an example for others and towards her own potential for personal transformation. While Spenser's medieval sources represent the cruel beauties' penance chiefly as a didactic

³⁰ One exception to this pattern is Gower's Rosiphelee, who recounts that she had a change of heart and agreed to accept a lover just before she died. Cupid honors this reversal by granting her a finely made, jeweled bridle for her horse—a small consolation for a figure who is condemned to ride that horse in a painful, shaming pageant for eternity.

³¹ Tonkin, *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral*, 93.

spectacle intended to “frighten reluctant women into agreeing to a relationship,” Spenser foregrounds penance’s effect on the penitent herself.³²

MIRABELLA’S SOFTENING

The action of Book Six begins with the protagonist Calidore, a comely, gracious knight, on a quest to defeat the Blatant Beast, a monster who represents slander and the invasion of privacy. Calidore drops out of the poem altogether from Cantos Four through Nine; when he re-enters the narrative, he strays from his quest to live among shepherds and woo the beautiful, nobly born foundling Pastorella (who, like Shakespeare’s Perdita, has been raised as a shepherd’s daughter). Much critical debate about Book Six concerns this prolonged truancy, which distinguishes Calidore from Spenser’s other central heroes. Does Spenser invite us to blame Calidore for abandoning his quest or praise him for escaping the corruption of courtly society?³³

A sense of retrospection and regret suffuses Book Six, the final completed book of Spenser’s ambitious, unfinished epic. Calidore’s signature move is to intrude upon someone’s privacy and then express regret for the intrusion. When he does this to Priscilla and Aladine, he craves pardon and labors to “acquite” himself, claiming “it was his fortune, not his fault” (3.2.1). He makes it up to them by courteous service. But some damages

³² Battles, “In folly ripe,” 26.

³³ Calidore’s truancy aligns him with Pyrocles and Musidorus, the principal heroes of Sidney’s *Arcadia*, who are engaged in a prolonged pastoral diversion from their own quest throughout the fiction. The captive princess Erona will soon be burned at the stake if they do not arrive to rescue her, but the princes cannot resist the desire to stay and woo the Arcadian princesses before resuming this mission.

cannot be reversed or compensated, as Colin Clout tells Calidore after the knight invades and dispels the spectacle of the dancing graces on Mt. Acidale.

Book Six is about the limitations of human power and achievement, including the limits of Spenser's own poetic project and of poetry in general. The dynamic of incompleteness that Berger describes as characteristic of the *Faerie Queene* generally is most pronounced in Book Six. Here, the poet speaks of his own weariness, and even the heroic Arthur is more tired and distracted than ever before. The poet seems to lose faith in the possibility of reform—of rehabilitating an offender so that she can learn from experience, rather than just being made into an example.

In Cantos 7 and 8, Spenser unfolds the story of Mirabella, a lowly born woman whose exceptional beauty leads her to be “lifted up to honorable place” (6.7.28.2) and admired by every knight who sees her. She grows “proud and insolent” (29.1), and although the knights who sue for her love are all “worthy,” she scorns them all (29.2-3). Her hard-hearted refusal drives twenty-two knights to “languish long in lifeconsuming smart” and eventually kills them (31.3-4). News of their deaths reaches the god Cupid, who summons Mirabella to his court. She stubbornly refuses to speak, and Cupid pronounces the usual judgment “as is by law ordained” in cases like hers (36.5). Spenser does not specify what this judgment is; perhaps the penalty is death, since Mirabella is said to have “murdered” these men, or perhaps it is to fall in love with a base man, a punishment commonly wished upon hard-hearted women in Petrarchan lyric. (In Spenser's tenth *Amoretti* sonnet, the speaker asks the god of love to punish his cruel beloved in this way: to “shake” her “proud heart” and

bow it down to a “baser make.”)³⁴ Whatever Cupid’s initial sentence is, its severity moves Mirabella to fall down before the court and cry out for mercy (6.7.36). The god relents and imposes a “penance” on Mirabella, “that through this worlds wyde wilderness/ she wander should in companie of those [Scorn and Disdain], / till she had sav’d so many loves, as she did lose” (37.9).

When Timias and Serena encounter Mirabella, she has wandered for two years and “saved” only two lovers. She rides on a mangy horse or ass while her keepers, Scorn (a “lewd fool”) and Disdain (a powerful giant), subject her to constant beatings and mockery. Three men try unsuccessfully to rescue Mirabella: Timias rushes in but gets captured by Disdain, who ties a rope around his neck and leads him along like a dog, and Enias also gets defeated. Prince Arthur finally manages to subdue Mirabella’s captors, but just as he is preparing to strike Disdain a fatal blow, Mirabella begs Arthur to spare her punisher, since her own life will “by his death have lamentable end” (6.7.17.9). Arthur offers to liberate her from these “villains,” but Mirabella declines, telling him that she must fulfill this penance “lest unto [her] betide a greater ill” (6.8.30.4).

Mirabella enters the narrative in Canto 7 just after Prince Arthur administers a severe punishment against another proud and scornful offender against the virtue of Courtesy, a discourteous knight named Turpine. Arthur “baffles” this offender, hanging him upside down by his heels to make “the picture of his punishment” into a vivid cautionary example

³⁴ In Sidney’s *Arcadia*, this punishment befalls the young princess Erona, who tears down images of Cupid throughout her kingdom to stop her subjects from superstitious adoration of the god. Cupid inflames her with love for Antiphilus, a man of “mean parentage,” who scorns her love and ends up betraying her in ways that place her whole kingdom in danger (*The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, 302).

for others (6.7.27). By juxtaposing these instances of violent humiliation, Spenser seems to suggest that the proper response to Mirabella's suffering is not to sympathize or intervene in her defense, but to maintain a spectator's distance and heed the moral lesson she represents. At the beginning of Canto 8, the narrator spells out this lesson in two sententious stanzas that could function as a motto for the emblematic spectacle of Mirabella's punishment: he urges "gentle ladies" to eschew cruelty and be "soft and tender" toward their lovers, rather than abusing the power that the god of love has entrusted to them. "Ensample take of Mirabella's case," he warns the ladies, lest they too end up condemned to a lifetime of "wretched woes" (6.8.1-2).

Over the course of her penitential experience, Mirabella changes in such a way as to become more than a bad example of Petrarchan scorn and pride: she becomes capable of compassion when she sees a man (who has tried and failed to rescue her) suffering "for her sake." Mirabella's stereotypical qualities are undeniable, but the fact that she does not utterly devolve into a personification of Scorn or Disdain herself (but is instead punished by external avatars of these characteristics) illuminates Spenser's sense of the transformative potential of penance.

Spenser's accounts of curing and cleansing at the Hermitage and the House of Holiness each affirm the possibility that characters afflicted by guilt and shame can be regenerated through penitential discipline, but Mirabella's leaking vessels suggest a darker picture of penitence, in which no amount of work or contrite feeling can ever be enough to absolve an offender's transgressions. For Elizabethan Protestants, this bleak outlook was typically offset by a faithful affirmation of the saving power of grace, which could intervene

to deliver even the most depraved sinner. But in Mirabella's story, Spenser imagines the painful aspects of reformed penitence without the consolation of gracious intervention. (Prince Arthur is often read as an allegorical representative of Christian grace, but the fact that he is unable to release Mirabella from her penitential suffering suggests that his redemptive power is limited in this scene.)

The poet repeatedly raises the question of whether Mirabella will eventually be released or whether she will be punished indefinitely, like Lidia in *Orlando Furioso* (who is imprisoned in the underworld, where smoke continually fills her eyes) and the condemned beauties described above. When the poet first introduces Mirabella in Canto 6, he states that he "must a while forbear" to reveal how she "did acquite" herself (6.6.17.2-3), but this deferred acquittal never arrives, despite Mirabella's own claim that "all is now repaid with interest again" (6.8.21.9). Spenser also raises and then undermines the possibility that Mirabella might be saved by a heroic rescue: the proem to Canto 8 states that Arthur "quites Mirabell from dreed," but Mirabella later makes it clear that it is not within the knight's power to release her from her penance, even after he has subdued her tormentor Disdaine. Indeed, failed rescue is a recurrent theme of this episode, as Timias, Enias, and finally Arthur each make unsuccessful efforts to deliver Mirabella. The penalty imposed by Cupid—she must "save" as many lovers as she killed—offers some hope that her punishment will eventually be concluded. But since she has only saved two men and has twenty-one more to go, her quest appears as interminable as that of the Squire of Dames. Even if Mirabella could complete this task and settle her legal obligation to Cupid's court, she would remain burdened by two cumbersome pieces of allegorical baggage:

Here in this bottle, said the sorry Maid,
I put the tears of my contrition,
Till to the brim I have it full defray'd:
And in this bag which I behind me don,
I put repentance for things past and gone.
Yet is the bottle leak, and bag so torn,
That all which I put in, falls out anon,
And is behind me trodden down of Scorn,
Who mocketh all my pain, and laughs the more I mourn. (6.8.24)

The leaking bag and bottle appear fairly late in this episode, after Arthur has subdued Disdaine and conversed with Mirabella; Spenser does not mention them in earlier descriptions. By introducing these additional burdens just after concluding the story of Mirabella's crime and sentence, Spenser contrasts the experience of legal punishment, which allows for some possibility of eventual resolution (once the offender has served her time or "defrayed" the debt she owes), to the more intractable experience of internal contrition. Since Mirabella feels bound to carry these objects herself (despite Arthur's protest that it would be "much more comely" for her punishers to carry them) and they don't appear to be imposed on her by any external judge, they may signify the solitary struggle of repentance and felt impossibility of forgiving oneself.

The iconography of the bottle and bag recalls classical accounts of the Danaides (or Belides), women whose eternal punishment is to fill and refill leaking vessels with water from the Styx; they appear alongside Tantalus in Spenser's rendering of the underworld (1.5.35). But the contents of Mirabella's vessels, "repentance" and "contrition," signal Spenser's introduction of Christian concerns into an otherwise pagan narrative. These allegorical images of insufficiency give voice to anxieties generated by the reformation of sacramental

penance, which denied the value of penitential works and reconceived absolution as God's gracious and unmerited forgiveness of the whole person, rather than her particular acts.

Although Mirabella's penance fails to lead to the "acquittal" that the poet repeatedly promises and then defers, it does release her from the fate of becoming permanently defined by her past transgressions. Suzanne Wofford writes that Spenser imagines sin as "the moment when a human being allows a daemon to overtake him or her, becoming as it were completely 'obsessed' by the one devouring trait...until he or she becomes, like Malbecco, nothing but a sign of the possessing daemon."³⁵ Wofford refers to a well-known example of allegorical reduction and constraint in Book Three of *The Faerie Queene*, when a jealous and miserly husband becomes so obsessed and overtaken by jealousy that he loses his humanity and metamorphoses into an inhuman creature named Gealousie. I argue that Mirabella's story inverts the direction of Malbecco's metamorphosis: she *begins* as a static allegorical figure, but grows into a more complex person, a conscientious agent who is reflective about her own actions and shows some capacity for change. It is penance that makes this transformation possible.

Mirabella's penance reverses the roles of cruel tyrant and suffering suitor: she is forced into the position of a rejected lover, enduring humiliating afflictions at the hands of pitiless tormentors who refuse her even a moment's comfort and laugh dismissively at her pain. As a public spectacle structured by inversion, her penance resembles sixteenth-century punishments for unruly women such as carting, skimmington rides, the ducking stool, and the scold's bridle, which violently incorporated female bodies into didactic displays designed

³⁵ Suzanne Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 303.

to coerce other women into obedience.³⁶ These punishments served to hurt, frighten, and shame the offender herself into submission, but their chief purpose was to enforce social discipline by holding her up as a negative example before others.³⁷

Violent penances for disobedient women were part of a larger cultural phenomenon of shaming punishments that targeted both sexes in Renaissance England. These civic punishments emerged from popular customs of charivari, and they typically involved a parade through town accompanied by raucous music. Offenders were often forced to ride a horse facing backwards or without a saddle, and their transgressions were indicated by symbolic garments, placards pinned to their clothes, or even single letters such as B for Bawd.³⁸ Martin Ingram writes that “magistrates clearly took delight in making the punishment fit the crime” by devising more elaborate displays of poetic justice.³⁹ Ingram

³⁶ Susan D. Amussen describes this logic of inversion and provides an overview of historical debates about early modern shaming punishments in her recent review essay, “Turning the World Upside Down: Gender and Inversion in the Work of David Underdown,” *History Compass* 11.5 (2013): 394-404. On shaming punishments for women who were perceived as unduly bold, proud or defiant in their speech, see Lynda Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (1991): 179-213; David Underdown, “The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England,” in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116-36; and Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992).

³⁷ On English Renaissance punishments that combined violence and shame, see Susan Amussen, “Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meanings of Violence in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 1-34; Martin Ingram, “Shame and Pain: Themes and Variations in Tudor Punishments,” in *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1700: Punishing the English*, ed. Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 36-62; and David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday, *Cultures of shame: exploring crime and morality in Britain 1600-1900* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³⁸ Ingram, “Shame and Pain,” 40-42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

cites two examples of punishments for “false dealing” that both resonate with the symbolic elements of Mirabella’s penance: coal merchants who gave false measure were forced to ride through town carrying heavy sacks of coal, and a man who had illegally tapped a conduit for his own well was paraded on horseback while water leaked down onto him continuously from a conduit-like vessel mounted on his head.⁴⁰

Since the purpose of such rituals was to make a cautionary example of the offender, it was important for them to be clearly legible; beholders must be able to tell at a glance why this person was being punished and how her punishment fit her crime. Such vivid simplicity was crucial in order for beholders to apprehend the spectacle’s moral lesson, and it also enabled them to experience its festive dimension: the dark pleasure of laughing together at the sight of an offender getting what she deserves, of being in on a joke at her expense. Compassion for the offender would undermine these responses of laughter and learning, which each demand a sense of emotional detachment from the punished human being at the center of the spectacle.

Spenser’s initial description of Mirabella’s penance in Cantos 7 and 8 would seem to offer just this sort of clarity and the dark satisfaction that goes along with it. What could be a more fitting punishment for a scornful and disdainful woman than to be publicly tormented by Scorn and Disdain personified? It is precisely this apparent simplicity that has led many critics to regard this episode as a simple misogynistic fantasy of a cruel woman getting what she deserves. But Spenser repeatedly shows that the significance of Mirabella’s punishment, unlike that of a skimmington ride or other shaming ritual, is not at all apparent to the people

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

who witness it. Timias misinterprets her as an abused maiden in need of rescue (6.7.45), and Arthur and Enias subsequently act on this same mistaken assumption (6.8.6). By the time these misinterpretations occur, Spenser's readers know better, because the poet has already described Mirabella's crime and pronounced her "worthily revenge[d]" by Cupid's court (6.7.32.2). But when Spenser first introduces Mirabella, he withholds the meaning of her suffering from readers and characters alike. He defers the revelation that Mirabella is a criminal being justly punished, and he also incorporates misleading suggestions that she is being "unmeetly" abused:

So both [Timias and Serena] together traveled, til they met
With a fair maiden clad in mourning weed,
Upon a mangy Jade unmeetly set,
And a lewd fool her leading thorough dry and wet.

But by what means that shame to her befell,
And how thereof herself she did acquite,
I must awhile forbear to you to tell....(6.6.16.6-17.3)

Although Spenser will later reveal that she is being "worthily" penalized by Cupid's court (6.7.32.2), he initially makes her punishment indistinguishable from undeserved torment.

When Timias, the young squire who serves Prince Arthur, first encounters Mirabella, he sees her as a fair maiden being abused by villains—a view that Spenser reinforces by describing her as "unmeetely set" upon a mangy jade (6.6.16.8)—and he immediately feels moved to rescue her.

By labeling Mirabella's court sentence "penance" (6.30.3), Spenser signals a return to the concerns of Book One. Previously in the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, "penance" has referred mostly to a period of trial and suffering that a woman imposes upon a man in order that he may prove himself worthy of her, such as the suffering that Timias endures after betraying

Belpheobe in Book Four. In Book Six, penance remains bound up with amorous relations, since it is imposed by Cupid to punish crimes of the heart. But unlike the purgatorial suffering of Timias (and the comparable fusion of Petrarchan and penitential suffering described in Spenser's *Hymne in Honor of Love*), Mirabella's penance is structured in ways that conspicuously re-introduce the Christian machinery of Book One. It includes vessels of Christian emotion (contrition and repentance), and it features emblematic pageantry reminiscent of the House of Pride and the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins. Most importantly, this episode reintroduces the model of penitence-as-rehabilitation that informs the House of Holiness sequence, but positions that model against the penitence-as-stasis figured by Despair.

Some readers describe Book Six as a series of successful redemptions and reconciliations.⁴¹ Others read this book with a less hopeful view, finding a pattern of diminishing success; Jeff Dolven claims that Spenser loses faith in courtesy itself and in the project of reforming offenders, rather than violently making examples of them (the practice represented by Book Five's punitive displays). The Mirabella episode challenges both of these readings. Critics with both of these perspectives regard Mirabella's penance as anomalous. For Tonkin and Anderson, Mirabella is mostly unchanged and thus serves as an exception to the pattern of successful reforms; for Dolven, Mirabella's newfound compassion makes her an exceptional story of successful reform in a legend where failed or unsatisfactory instruction is the norm. These differences of interpretation raise the question,

⁴¹ See Humphrey Tonkin, *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral*, and Judith Anderson, *Reading the Allegorical Intertext*.

what do we mean by reform, and how can we determine when it is really done? That is, how can we know for sure that a character has left her old sinful ways behind?

For many Protestant commentators in the period, the answer to this question was drastic: a sinner has achieved true conversion only when he has transformed himself so thoroughly as to be unrecognizable. These writers refer to New Testament injunctions to mortify and kill the “old man” in order to be reborn as a “new man.” As Calvin wrote in the 1541 *Institutes*, penitence is defined as “the putting to death (mortification) of our flesh and old person and the vivification of the spirit.” This process is not complete “unless all that we have of ourselves is brought to nothing and destroyed.”⁴² This is, Calvin acknowledges, “a very difficult commandment, since it involves divesting ourselves of ourselves and abandoning our own nature.”⁴³ We find this kind of scorched-earth penitence modeled in Book One, where Redcrosse is tortured and cleansed until no part of his corrupt old self remains. But as the differences of interpretation about Book Six’s reforms suggest, such absolute renewals are rare and difficult to discern, especially in a setting without religious authorities and localized sites of discipline like the House of Holiness.

By referring to Cupid’s sentence as “penance” (6.7.37.6), Spenser links Mirabella’s story to an embattled tradition that had been abolished as a sacrament during the reformation of the English church and remained a locus of religious controversy throughout the sixteenth century. “Penance” in post-reformation England referred to shaming punishments administered by ecclesiastical (and sometimes civic) authorities for two

⁴² Calvin, “Of Penitence,” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1541 French edition, trans. Elsie McKee, 274-275.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 275.

purposes: to humble and reform the offender herself, and to make her into a public example for others.⁴⁴ Spenser explores the tension and overlap between these dual purposes throughout both editions of *The Faerie Queene*. His accounts of punishment throughout the epic may be charted as a continuum, ranging from sheer punitive violence toward more beneficial and rehabilitative forms of discipline. At one extreme, Spenser describes victims of punishment who have no chance to change their ways or atone for their transgressions: tartarean shades like Tantalus and Aesculapius, who endure “endless penance” (1.5.42) in the underworld, and victims of “poetic justice” like Sanglier and Turpine, who have been violently converted into didactic examples.⁴⁵ At the other extreme are characters who arrive at some sense of spiritual rebirth and healing through penitential discipline, including Redcrosse at the House of Holiness and Timias and Serena at the hermitage.

Mirabella’s inconclusive penance places her somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Her punishment fails to lead to spiritual rebirth or to a radical reversal of the sort we see in Book 4, when Poecana, another beautiful woman who has “defaste” her natural gifts with cruelty, reforms her life in the space of a single stanza:

And she whom nature did so faire create,
That she mote match the fairest of her daies,
Yet with lewd loves and lust intemperate
Had it defaste, thenceforth reformd her waies,
That all men much admyrde her change, and spake her praise. (4.9.16.5-9)

Compared to this comically rapid improvement, Mirabella’s unfinished penance feels anticlimactic. For this character, whose crime has had irreversible effects on others, penance

⁴⁴ On “penance” as a term for secular penalties in London, see Martin Ingram, “Shame and Pain: Themes and Variations in Tudor Punishments,” *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1700: Punishing the English*, 39.

⁴⁵ Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction*, Chapter 6, “Punishment.”

threatens to become endless work. The protracted quality of her punishment points to the poet's sense of uncertainty about the endpoint of both inward repentance and outward penitential works: how, Spenser wonders, can an individual ever know when she has done enough (or suffered enough) to absolve her of her transgressions?

Spenser raises this question of endings in his first introduction of Mirabella, when he says he “must a while forbear” to reveal how she “did acquite” herself of her crime (6.6.17.2-3). This deferral occurs again in the proem to Canto 8, which promises to reveal how Arthur “quites Mirabell from dread.” Despite Mirabella's own claim that “all is now repayd with interest againe” (6.8.21.9), her penance has no foreseeable end; she must continue to wander with Scorne and Disdaine “lest unto [her] betide a greater ill” (6.8.30.4). Even if she could carry out her legal obligations to Cupid's court by saving as many lovers as she spilled, a quest that seems as interminable as that of the Squire of Dames, she would remain subject to shame as well as guilt. The intractability of the latter is figured by her leaky bottle of contrite tears and her torn bag of repentance, which she endlessly endeavors to fill or “defray” (6.8.24.3). Like the Giant's scales in Book 5, which weigh abstractions, Mirabella's bottle and bag call attention to the actual impossibility of measuring and quantifying repentance as if it were a material substance (although tears, which both symbolize and manifest contrition, at least make the bottle image possible to visualize). By ridiculing the notion that repentance can be contained and tallied up in a bag (if only the bag were intact), Spenser critiques the logic of “repayment with interest” that underlies Mirabella's penitential quest. As a result, the prospect of paying down her crime or becoming released from its painful consequences appears ever more remote.

Spenser opens up one possibility of release from this bleak condition when the squire Timias, his heart swelling with indignation at the sight of Mirabella's "great abuse," rushes to her defense (6.7.45.1-4). After an unfortunate slip of his foot, Timias winds up captive to Scorne and Disdaine himself, and the sight of his humiliation moves Mirabella:

Who after thraldome of the gentle Squire,
Which she beheld with lamentable eye,
Was touched with compassion entire,
And much lamented his calamity,
That for her sake fell into misery. (6.8.3.1-5)

This stanza immediately follows Spenser's sententious gloss on Mirabella's story (6.8.1-2), which admonishes women to repudiate cruelty and be "soft and tender" (6.8.2.3). It is as though Mirabella has overheard this lesson. This is the first time we see her "touched" by an emotional response to another person. Her compassion has the effect of humanizing her, so that she is no longer quite the same woman that the poet had offered as an "ensample" just a few lines before.

The emotional power of this moment derives from Mirabella's identification with both Timias, the victim of shame and humiliation, *and* his tormentors. Mirabella's own experience of penitential "thraldome" has put her into the position of her former admirers, and after suffering in this state for two years, "of no man mercified" (6.7.36.5), she has attained a new capacity for compassion. Not only does she sympathize with Timias's pain and shame; she also laments that he has incurred this misery "for her sake." This recognition of her own part in his suffering brings Mirabella closer to the humility and gratitude she displays in Canto 8's final stanzas as she parts ways with Arthur and his companions. She

voluntarily chooses to continue her penance, thanks her would-be rescuers for their “good will,” and makes a modest exit: “so humbly taking leave, she turned aside” (6.8.30.6). This leave-taking shows how far Mirabella has come from the days when she boasted of her own godlike power to “save, or spill, whom she would height” (6.7.31).

Measured against the more climactic conclusions that Spenser could have imagined for Mirabella’s story—acquittal, redemption, the satisfaction of legal debts, or even escape with her rescuers—these quiet expressions of acknowledgment and thanks may seem insignificant, as though Mirabella has learned little more than common courtesy. But Courtesy is after all the governing virtue of Book Six, and Spenser repeatedly represents this virtue as founded upon compassion and mercy (as well as a concern for honorable reputation and the avoidance of shame). Calidore says as much in the book’s first canto, when he spares Crudor’s life and chooses instead to reform him with gentle persuasions. He proclaims that an honorable knight must avoid “pride and cruelty” by acknowledging that “All flesh is frayle, and full of ficklenesse, / Subject to fortunes chance, still changing new; / What haps to day to me, to morrow may to you” (6.1.41.7-9).

In spite of the singsong quality of these lines, and the fact that Spenserian knights (including Calidore himself) often fail to live up to the principle Calidore voices here, this affirmation of shared frailty as a basis for courtesy merits serious consideration. It resonates with the work of recent scholars including James Kuzner and Joseph Campana, who have

begun to investigate the importance of vulnerability in early modern ethics.⁴⁶ Campana has recently argued that a sense of “shared vulnerability,” which “implies an ethical openness to others,” constitutes a “governing virtue” and ideal of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*.⁴⁷ The notion of common vulnerability to fortune’s blows may provide a promising way to read brief exchanges of compassion, like the one we have just witnessed between Mirabella and Timias, as charged with ethical significance.

What separates repentance from despair is the hope that a penitent can change, rather than sinking further into sin. In the Christian tradition, this change is initiated by divine grace softening the sinner’s heart. But in Mirabella’s case, it is initiated by a court sentence that forces her to confront the effects of her actions. Reform emerges not in a moment of gracious intervention, but during the laborious process of penance and self-recognition. Spenser thus advances a vision of penitence in which restitution and amendment of life emerge as the most important steps, or at least the only ones that can be undertaken within the secular world.

Spenser seeks an alternative to the Catholic tradition’s logic of penal satisfaction and to the despair-inducing logic of Protestant models, which deny the value of penitential works altogether. Absent from this episode are the consolations of priests, churches, or a directly apprehended savior. Cupid issues judgment, but Mirabella and her fellow Faerie creatures are left to work out the terms of reconciliation and reform on their own. Spenser seeks a way to

⁴⁶ Kuzner, *Open Subjects: English Renaissance Republicans, Modern Selfhoods and the Virtue of Vulnerability* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), and Campana, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Suffering, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ *The Pain of Reformation*, 23.

affirm some value for penitential suffering and work, even if that work in no way contributes to absolution. He incorporates a combination of Greco-Roman and Christian elements into the outlandish tableau of Mirabella's punishment, but the situation he describes is also relevant for secular audiences: that of a penitent offender who questions whether any amount of work and suffering can alleviate her guilt or foster reconciliation with those she has harmed, in the absence of a divine source of absolution.

Even though Mirabella's penance does not lead to a definitive rebirth or radical transformation, it does free her from the fate of other literary cruel beauties like Anaxarete. Mirabella remains forcibly bound to Scorn and Disdaine, but she becomes distinct from them as she begins to feel compassion. This small but significant transformation suggests that she is no longer fully defined by her past crimes. This outcome may offer some consolation to penitents who struggle with the question of whether any amount of penitential work or feeling can help to draw them closer to redemption. We cannot know (much less influence) whether we will be forgiven in the next life, Spenser implies—but through penitence and discipline, we can endeavor to become more ethically responsive to others within this life.

Book Six is a culminating reflection on the limits of human power to contain and resolve problems: to rescue others, to defeat slander, to produce a definitive poetic achievement, to reform offenders, or even to reform oneself. In this book, we sense the poet getting exhausted, losing faith in his own materials, and being tempted to abandon his own quest. Calidore finally accomplishes his quest of capturing the Blatant Beast, but the book concludes with the beast's escape from Calidore's control.

The Mirabella episode, inconclusive by its nature, fits into this pattern of diminishing success and undercut resolutions—a pattern that is characteristic of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole but especially pronounced here—in several ways. First, Mirabella demonstrates the limited power of chivalric rescue; the knights’ multiple failed interventions and misinterpretations of her case suggest the near-impossibility of knowing what to do about and for others.⁴⁸ Second, she reminds readers of the limits of our own interpretive abilities; no matter what set of critical tools we bring to these cantos, certain features of the episode, such as Cupid’s initial sentence and the “greater ill” that Mirabella seeks to avoid, are likely to remain opaque. Finally, she allegorizes the impossibility of containing or concluding penitential pain.

This principle of irresolution is already suggested by Redcrosse’s repeated cures in Book One. But the Hermit’s counsel in Canto 6 reactivates the dream of a definitive cure, though by noticeably different means than the healers in the House of Holiness. Unlike Caelia and company, the Hermit counsels self-sufficiency and discipline, telling his patients, “In yourself your only help doth lie.” The Hermit’s sententious counsel sounds authoritative in the moment, but it is quickly belied by Spenser’s repeated statements that slander, shame, and reproach can bring anyone down, regardless of their desert or their blameless conduct.

The Mirabella episode is certainly about gender and power, as Shaver and Cavanagh demonstrate. But it is also about the dream of a one-time, definitive reformation, which makes itself felt across divisions of gender and class: this is a human struggle, faced by anyone with a crime to clear. As Berger’s reading of Prince Hal suggests, this hope is not

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Joseph Loewenstein for this formulation.

only self-deceiving; it also leads us to evade moral responsibility, to turn truant and forgo the difficult process of “reformation...now and always,” reformation as an ongoing daily reckoning with our sins. It may seem counterintuitive to read a stock figure like Mirabella as a model for less evasive ways of living with one’s past actions; it is also possible that in doing so, I too am reducing Mirabella to a didactic example. Nonetheless, the fact that Mirabella keeps living matters, since other characters who have done irreversible harm to others (Pandosto and Amphialus) find it impossible to go on living. There is something admirable in Mirabella’s refusal to discontinue her penance.

Spenser resists an end to Mirabella’s narrative—one that would decide her fate once and for all—to reinforce his poem’s refrain that no punishment, personal reform, rescue, or salvation is ever complete. This insight is borne out in the form of *The Faerie Queene* as Spenser repeatedly makes and then unmakes climactic endings; the culminating example of this unmaking is perhaps his choice to pull apart Amoret and Scudamour’s hermaphroditic embrace at the end of the 1590 poem. Redemption conceived in this way, as never complete, demands a different kind of representation from the narratives of punishment and reform that Spenser encountered in his own reading of *Metamorphoses* and includes elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, notably in the legend of Justice. Mirabella’s machinery and her experiences of humiliation and failed rescue work towards a new iconography of redemption as an endless struggle, a romance journey of wandering through the woods.

Chapter 3: “Almost a miracle”: The Ends of Penitence in *The Winter’s Tale*

INTRODUCTION

The Winter’s Tale begins with a series of broken relationships as Leontes abandons trust in his wife, friend, child, and subjects. Among the many devastating losses that Leontes’ jealous delusions precipitate is the breakdown of trust between penitent and confessor. As the king pressures Camillo to confirm his suspicions about Hermione, he recalls the intimacy that the two men once shared:

I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart, as well
My chamber-counsels, wherein, priest-like, thou
Hast cleansed my bosom; I from thee departed
Thy penitent reformed. (1.2.233-237)¹

This recollection of past confidence signals Shakespeare’s engagement with post-reformation controversies about the value of auricular confession, a contested feature of the abolished sacrament of penance. These lines suggest that interpersonal outreach can offer genuine consolation: even if no divinity intervenes to batter a penitent’s heart and regenerate his spirit, and no priest is authorized to pronounce his absolution on God’s behalf, a friend’s counsel can cleanse his bosom and guide him towards a better future. In isolation, this passage would seem to portray this relatively secular approach to penitence in a hopeful light. But in context, Leontes’ words mark the disappearance of such a possibility from the tragic action of this play. When Leontes furiously concludes that he has been “deceived” by

¹ All citations to *The Winter’s Tale* and *Pandosto* refer to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

Camillo (1.2.238), Shakespeare reveals that the penitential relationship described in these lines proves difficult to sustain in a world beset by fraudulence and mistrust.

Leontes' description of Camillo as "priest-like" anticipates a later account of the king's penitence as "saint-like sorrow" (5.1.2). Both phrases appear out of place in Shakespeare's Sicilia, where no actual Christian saints or confessors exist. In the absence of such figures, the work of reformation falls to ordinary people without divine or institutional authority; even the Clown plays a confessor in the play's final act, pardoning Autolycus's offenses and urging the con artist to "amend [his] life" (5.2.146-152). The conventions of romance and the conditions of religious censorship could both account for Shakespeare's use of Greco-Roman mythology in this play, but these factors do not explain why he explicitly calls attention to the *absence* of Christian penitential discourses, both by alluding to them (as in the phrase "priest-like") and by reconfiguring them in secularized or parodic forms. I believe that Shakespeare highlights this absence in order to investigate how penitence might be experienced outside of religious dispensations altogether. Rather than nostalgically recalling the abolished Catholic sacrament of penance or affirming a reformed view of repentance as an interior transformation that only God can initiate, *The Winter's Tale* departs from both confessional models to explore the possibility of redemption in a disenchanted world.

For Shakespeare's early seventeenth-century audiences, Leontes' reference to past confessions would likely have recalled the practice of sacramental penance (including auricular confession) that had been abolished during the reformation of the English church. As Sarah Beckwith has shown, this change radically altered the process of seeking

forgiveness. Protestant believers were encouraged to confess their sins to God and to each other; ministers could still hear confessions and offer counsel, but were no longer authorized to pronounce the penitent's absolution. Without the "ritual assurance" of priestly absolution that had characterized the Catholic rite of confession, forgiveness became "both no one's and everyone's to bestow."² Beckwith argues that Shakespeare's tragedies and romances explore the consequences of this transformation, which requires the speakers in any scene of confession to "improvise" speech acts of acknowledgment and forgiveness detached from a divinely authorized script.

Even as Shakespeare minimizes the presence of supernatural forces in the play (we do not witness divine interventions like the descent of Jove in *Cymbeline*), he invests human acts of outreach and forgiveness with a level of significance that verges on the sacred. When Camillo offers to help Florizel escape from Bohemia, the stunned prince asks, "How...may this, almost a miracle, be done? / That I may call thee something more than man" (4.4.539-40). Florizel uses "miracle" playfully here, referring to the improbability of a safe escape; he can scarcely imagine a mere man pulling this feat off successfully. But these lines anticipate the play's final scene, in which human artifice produces an improbable, wondrous spectacle that feels (almost) miraculous to the characters who witness it. Critics, too, are sometimes tempted to call this scene miraculous, even as they acknowledge that it does not involve a supernatural resurrection or transformation.

By arguing that Shakespeare detaches penitence from Christian frameworks, I do not mean to suggest that religion itself is absent from the play. The Greek gods do preside over

² Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 54.

Sicilia and Bohemia, and most characters believe that they judge human affairs. Hermione says that “if powers divine/ behold our human actions—as they do” (3.2.27-28), they will verify her innocence, and the king interprets Mamillius’s death as punishment from Apollo (3.2.143-44). Yet Shakespeare does not represent divine intervention onstage in this play as he does in *Cymbeline*, and he sometimes raises the possibility that the gods are merely indifferent spectators, leaving mortals to “do anything extempore,” as Autolycus speculates (4.4.680).³

My claim, then, is not that the gods are absent or merely illusory, but that they have little impact on characters’ experience of penitence. The mythology of *The Winter’s Tale* conspicuously lacks ritual or doctrinal prescriptions in this area. Leontes cannot confess to a priest or seek the aid of a divine savior, and he has no prospect of salvation, punishment or purgation after death. (Indeed, the play’s only mention of an afterlife comes from the irreverent Autolycus, who “sleep[s] out the thought of it” [4.3.30]). Instead, his repentance unfolds through interactions with Paulina, who takes up and drastically expands the pastoral role Camillo once played as she oversees the king’s penitential suffering.

Paulina’s harsh punitive treatment of the king takes Shakespeare’s representation of secular penitence in a dark direction. Her regular practice of wounding Leontes where it hurts the most, for instance by rebuking him for the death of Mamillius (“He dies to me again when talked of”, responds Leontes), bears little resemblance to Leontes’ bygone exchanges of “chamber-counsels” with Camillo. By tracing Shakespeare’s skepticism about the possibility of resolving guilt through personal interaction, this chapter works against a

³ Even Hermione’s invocation of the gods during the trial arguably betrays some uncertainty about their watchful presence, as her conditional phrase (“*if* powers divine”) suggests.

widely shared view that transcendence ultimately prevails over disenchantment in *The Winter's Tale*. In contrast to readers who suggest that Shakespeare reclaims an enduring sense of enchantment for the secular world by celebrating the redemptive powers of drama or affirming the sanctity of everyday human relationships, I argue that Shakespeare exposes the fragility and risks of redemption brought about by “fully human, fully secular” means.⁴ These risks include the following: 1) In the name of reform, one person may inflict gratuitous suffering and deception on another, as Paulina does to Leontes by lying to him about his wife’s death and continually renewing the pain of his conscience for sixteen years. 2) Even interventions intended to afflict the penitent’s conscience in salutary ways may lead him instead toward paralyzing despair, as the recollection of his sins becomes an endlessly repeated routine.⁵

In a world where gods seldom intervene directly in human affairs, how might ordinary people help one another to live through guilt and seek redemption? Second, what resources and responsibilities do dramatists bring to this struggle? This second question situates *The Winter's Tale* within critical debates about the relationship between secular drama and religious culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Recent accounts of this relationship within *Winter's Tale* criticism fall into three broad categories. Scholars including Ruth Vanita, Phebe Jensen, Michael O’Connell, and David Beauregard argue that the

⁴ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 97.

⁵ My view of Paulina’s punitive actions as more harmful than beneficial is indebted to Eric Mallin’s reading of Paulina as a torturer and con artist. See Mallin, “It is required,” in *Godless Shakespeare* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). See also Kiernan Ryan’s reading of Helena’s “miraculous” medicine in *All’s Well that Ends Well*, which claims that readers must acknowledge the dark motives and the “autocratic,” “coercive” nature of such illusory miracles: “Where Hope is coldest: *All’s Well that Ends Well*,” in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London: Routledge, 2005), 43-44.

dramatic spectacles within the play represent Shakespeare's sympathetic recuperation of Catholic devotional practices, such as the veneration of saints, holy images, and the Virgin Mary.⁶ I share these readers' sense that Shakespeare critiques the iconoclastic extremes of the Reformation. An ambivalent or even sympathetic attitude towards Catholicism underlies the playwright's recognition that both faith *and* penitential works have practical value in the process of redemption.

On the other side of the confessional debate, Huston Diehl argues that *The Winter's Tale* develops a distinctively Protestant aesthetic exemplified by Paulina's animation of the statue. "In marked contrast to Autolycus's theatrical spectacles, which dazzle and deceive," Paulina's performance functions like a Protestant sermon: it stirs beholders' consciences and softens their stony hearts, moving them to pious wonder and repentance.⁷ According to Diehl, Shakespeare thus "imagines a legitimate role for the stage" within an iconoclastic culture suspicious of theatre.⁸ Casting Paulina as both dramatist and "minister," Shakespeare "appropriates the role of the preacher for the playwright."⁹

While Diehl sees Shakespeare as claiming a ministerial role for dramatists within the Protestant tradition, a third set of readers claims that Shakespeare offers dramatic art as an

⁶ See Vanita, "Mariological Memory in *The Winter's Tale*," *Studies in English Literature* 40.2 (2000), 311-337; Jensen, "Singing psalms to horn-pipes: festivity, iconoclasm, and Catholicism in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004): 279-306; O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138-42; Beauregard, *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2008), 109-123.

⁷ Diehl, "Does not the stone rebuke me?: The Pauline Rebuke and Paulina's Lawful Magic in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance*, ed. Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir (New York: Ashgate, 2008), 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

alternative to religion altogether, a source of “secular faith” and secular redemption.¹⁰ In Stanley Cavell’s words, *The Winter’s Tale* places theatre “in competition with religion, as if declaring itself religion’s successor.”¹¹ For these scholars, Paulina’s injunction to “awake your faith” invites her audiences, both onstage and off, to believe not in a religious concept or deity but in “the miracles of the stage.”¹² Jonathan Bate writes that just as Ovid’s Pygmalion awakened his statue through his own “art, imagination, and will-power,” Paulina’s art—which stands in for Shakespeare’s—becomes a “life-bringing force.” According to Bate, “The magic which Paulina claims to be lawful is that of theatre; nowhere is there a more powerful testimony to the creative, even redemptive, power of drama.”¹³

I read *The Winter’s Tale* not as a defense of a specific religious doctrine, but as an exploration of the liberating possibilities and negative consequences that arise when repentance becomes secularized, detached from religious ritual and doctrine. But whereas Bate, Lim, and others suggest that the statue scene confirms the triumph of theatricality as a “successor” to religion, I will highlight moments when Shakespeare undermines this view by showing that even artifice supposedly oriented towards bringing about redemption can instead drive an already-penitent subject toward paralyzing despair.

Critics have noted that Leontes’ penitential discipline under Paulina’s guidance has a mechanistic quality, as well as an endlessness, that threatens to freeze him into an allegorical

¹⁰ I quote John Pitcher’s Introduction to the Arden edition of *The Winter’s Tale*, 66.

¹¹ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218.

¹² Walter S. H. Lim, “Knowledge and Belief in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Studies in English Literature* 41.2 (2001), 319.

¹³ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 138-139.

emblem of remorse.¹⁴ Paulina's art could potentially "mend" him, but it could also trap him in an endless, futile series of penitential recreations.¹⁵ In this chapter, I consider a question that these critical accounts imply but do not explore: does Shakespeare suggest less paralyzing ways to repent, either by natural or artificial means?

EXTERNALIZING PENITENCE

Repentance in *The Winter's Tale* is both more external and more "artificial" (that is, effected by acts of performance) than in Shakespeare's main source text, Robert Greene's 1598 prose romance *Pandosto*. In Greene's version of the trial scene, the jealous king experiences a spontaneous and overpowering feeling of remorse immediately upon seeing his wife Bellaria die. Pandosto's "senses" are "appalled" by the sight, and he falls into a "swound" that leaves him unable to speak for three days (419). When he awakens, he condemns himself to himself:

O miserable Pandosto, what surer witness than conscience?...I have committed such a bloody fact, as repent I may, but recall I cannot...Are the gods just? Then let them revenge such brutish cruelty. My innocent babe I have drowned in the seas; my loving wife I have slain with slanderous suspicion; my trusty friend I have sought to betray, and yet the gods are slack to plague such offenses. (Greene 419-420)

After this outburst, he reaches for a sword, resolving to shed his own "guilty blood" as a "sacrifice" to those he killed, but his attendants restrain him from committing suicide.

When Shakespeare reimagines this scene in Act 3, Scene 2 of *The Winter's Tale*, he displaces most of this self-lacerating speech from the king to Paulina; that is, she voices the

¹⁴ Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Afterlives of the Saints: Hagiography, Typography, and Renaissance Literature* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996), 211.

¹⁵ T.G. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 148.

accusations that Pandosto made against himself. From the start, Leontes' experience of his wife's (apparent) death is more mediated than that of Pandosto, who witnesses Bellaria's death firsthand and is viscerally shocked by the sight. In the drama, it is not obvious that Hermione is dying, and Paulina rapidly glosses the significance of her faint: "This news is mortal to the Queen. Look down / and see what death is doing" (3.2.145-6). Moments later, she returns to confirm the queen's death; in order to maximize the painful impact of this news, she withholds it until she has first confronted Leontes with a list of his other offenses intended to make him "run mad indeed, stark mad" (3.2.180). Whereas Pandosto's "conscience" witnessed his "unnatural actions" and forced him to a painful recognition of the harm he had caused, Paulina takes up the conscience's role in this scene, describing with dramatic flair the same crimes that Pandosto had condemned in himself. It is Paulina, not the penitent, who laments that "vengeance" for the crime has "not dropped down yet"; she not only prays for such vengeance from the gods but takes it into her own hands, starting with the verbal torments she administers in this scene. Pandosto's suicidal hopelessness is also transposed into this scene, but once again, it is prompted by Paulina, who urges the king to forgo repentance and resign himself to despair:

O thou tyrant,
Do not repent these things, for they are heavier
Than all thy woes can stir; therefore betake thee
To nothing but despair. A thousand knees,
Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,
Upon a barren mountain, and still winter
In storm perpetual could not move the gods
To look that way thou wert. (3.2.204-211)

These lines echo contemporary Protestant critiques of the Catholic logic of satisfaction, and that is likely how Paulina means them: you should feel grievously sorry for what you've

done, and you should not evade that sorrow by imagining that it (or your actions) will have any influence on obtaining the gods' forgiveness. But the lines cut more deeply later in the play. The unheeded consolations that Cleomenes and other counselors offer to the king in Act 5 suggests that divine forgiveness would still not relieve Leontes' remorse. Even if Apollo granted him the pardon he entreats in this scene, he would still suffer for the loss of his wife and children, and for the irreversible harm he has done. Mamillius would still die to him again when talked of.

Over the course of this scene, Leontes moves from seeking Apollo's pardon toward dedicating himself to grief, with no mention of how the gods will perceive or respond to that grief. He devotes himself to sorrow because he feels that he deserves "shame perpetual," not because he believes that his sorrow will result in some eventual release. I suggest that this is also why Leontes does not kill himself: he feels that he owes it to Hermione to live on and suffer. If Paulina were really voicing a Protestant position in these lines, she would probably urge Leontes to throw himself on the gods' mercy, admitting his unworthiness, and humbly ask for their help. But instead, she advocates despair, which Protestants as well as Catholics regarded as a damnable sin. Only sixteen years later does she follow this affliction with a call for faith.

Shakespeare's displacements throughout this scene render an interior conflict external; in that sense, they may represent a practical means of adapting this prose romance for the stage, where no third-person narrator is available to render characters' inner torments and dialogues visible to the audience. But the generic difference alone does not account for this revision; Shakespeare could have written a soliloquy in which Leontes condemns himself

like Pandosto, acknowledges his own crimes, calls for the gods' vengeance upon himself, and surrenders to despair. Indeed, the king does utter a series of brief acknowledgments of his guilt before Paulina takes over: "the heavens themselves / do strike at my injustice" (143-144); "I have too much believed mine own suspicion" (148); "Apollo, pardon / my great profaneness 'gainst thine oracle" (150-151). He confesses his attempt to poison Polixenes and praises Camillo, whose goodness makes Leontes look worse by contrast: "How his piety / does make my deeds the blacker!" (168-169).

These lines indicate that Leontes does recognize his wrongdoing prior to Paulina's intervention, but they seem somewhat muted in comparison to Pandosto's histrionics: for instance, "I have too much believed my own suspicion" lacks the emotional force of "my innocent babe I have drowned in the seas." Based on this contrast, one possible explanation for what I have called Shakespeare's *displacement* of condemnation (from the king's self to another person) is that Paulina's intervention makes it possible for Leontes to confront the human suffering he has caused to the people closest to him, whereas before, he had been more focused on his transgressions against the gods: his dismissal of the oracle, the "great profaneness" that contrasts so unfavorably with Camillo's "piety."

A second explanation is that meaningful repentance requires a level of self-accusation that Leontes cannot achieve on his own, so that Paulina's external prompting represents a crucial catalyst that sets his struggle for redemption in motion. In more general terms, Shakespeare suggests that when a penitent subject cannot or does not recognize the depth of his wrongdoing (when his conscience fails to force a public confession out of him, or to torture him in proportion with the severity of his crimes), he needs someone else to

lead him towards a more thorough confrontation with himself. The scene's conclusion lends support to the view that Paulina has successfully moved Leontes to recognize his guilt more fully and submit himself to punishment. When Paulina makes the dubious claim that she will not remind Leontes of his crimes any more—"Do not receive affliction / at my petition...rather / let me be punished" (3.2.220-222)—she prompts the king to voluntarily ask for further "affliction," a request he will later repeat during the statue scene when Paulina offers, "I could afflict you further." By asking Paulina to "lead [him] / to these sorrows" (3.2.239-240), Leontes effectively consents to the "studied torments" (3.2.172) that she will inflict upon him for the next sixteen years.

Both of these explanations reinforce what I take to be the overall purpose of Shakespeare's strategy of displacement here and throughout Act 5 (that is, his development of Paulina as an external interlocutor who replaces or drowns out the internal voice of Leontes' conscience). That purpose is to dramatize a vision of repentance that is fundamentally this-worldly: one that unfolds through the penitent's confrontations with others, rather than interior struggles with himself or the gods.

The culminating moments of the trial scene in 3.2 frame repentance as a social phenomenon in three ways. First, as I argued above, Shakespeare implies that repentance can and perhaps must be facilitated by intervention from others: people like Camillo, who served as Leontes' confessor in the past and always sent the king away as a "penitent reformed," and Paulina, whose accusations spur the king to a more severe state of remorse. Second, Leontes' contrast between himself and Camillo suggests that even without making direct accusations, one person may stimulate another's critical self-recognition simply by acting

virtuously—acting in a way that makes the other’s deeds look “black,” or in other words, puts him to shame. In Act 5, Leontes describes this dynamic in terms of “interpretation:” when Florizel (falsely) reports Polixenes’ loving greetings to him, Leontes replies that his old friend’s kind overtures “are as interpreters/ of my behindhand slackness” (5.1.149-150). One man’s piety reveals another’s profaneness, one man’s kindness “interprets” another’s slackness: such moments, when Leontes measures himself unfavorably against others, evoke the play’s opening scene of courtly dialogue, in which each gentleman graciously insists that his own court’s hospitality is inferior. Third, in a social conception of repentance, divine judgment and punishment recede, while human consequences take on central importance in their place. In Leontes’ case, these consequences include acknowledging the suffering he has caused and enduring a sixteen-year series of humiliations that border on vengeance.

The trial scene illustrates each of these three social features of repentance, which Shakespeare continues to explore in Act 5. But this scene also hints at the dangers that a social and secular vision of repentance raises. By foregrounding the overblown theatricality of the speech that Paulina makes to prompt Leontes’ remorse, and by incorporating reactions from lords who feel that she has spoken to him with needless cruelty, Shakespeare implies that a repentance administered and performed by human agents is not to be taken lightly, or celebrated as a positive alternative to religious penitential frameworks. I will elaborate on this claim below, but to close my discussion of 3.2, I note one additional factor that troubles Shakespeare’s picture of social repentance in this scene. I have claimed that Paulina facilitates Leontes’ recognition of his guilt and thereby helps to put him on the path toward redemption. But Shakespeare also raises the possibility that by intervening so

drastically and seizing control of the drama of Leontes' repentance just as the king was beginning to acknowledge his wrongdoing on his own, Paulina actually *obscures* his inner remorse, so that the audience can never be sure how truly sorrowful he is. Once Paulina begins stage-directing Leontes in what T.G. Bishop has called her "theatre of remorse," every utterance of guilt from the king becomes as unreliable as a confession extracted under torture.¹⁶ The unknowable state of a person's inner conscience is a frequent preoccupation for Shakespeare and for dramatists in general. But *The Winter's Tale* complicates the familiar *topos* of the unknowable interior by incorporating a punisher-as-dramatist who guides and scripts Leontes' confessions before our eyes, leaving us unsure whether his performance of sorrow constitutes an authentic expression of his penitent nature or a product of Paulina's manipulative art.

PAULINA'S DRAMATIC REBUKE

When Paulina draws the curtain to reveal her lifelike sculpture of Hermione, the king is overcome with remorse: as if by "magic," he says, the stone has "conjured" his past "evils" to his "remembrance." Leontes asks the statue to "chide" him as he deserves, but then feels its mute presence as a reprimand in itself: "I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me/ For being more stone than it?" (5.3.37-38). Leontes feels ashamed because he recognizes the stone not only as a likeness of Hermione, but also as a reflection of his own most grievous faults: the hard heart and unyielding conviction that led him to destroy his family sixteen years earlier.

¹⁶ Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder*, 146.

By engineering this painful moment of self-recognition, Paulina engages in a didactic practice recommended by Renaissance defenders of the arts: confronting audience members with reflections of their own faults in order to elicit repentance and reform. We might expect this practice to be limited to Christian ministers—indeed, some anti-theatricalists believed it was “unlawful” for dramatists to take up the church’s work of corrective discipline—but apologists including Thomas Heywood accorded the secular stage a surprising degree of moral authority. In his *Apology for Actors*, published in 1612, Heywood claims that dramatists can provide beneficial moral instruction by “attacking the consciences of the spectators,” confronting them with the “ugliness of their vices” and thereby “making them hate” those vices “in themselves.” There is a fine line between hating one’s sins and hating oneself, as Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight learns from Despair—but the danger of suicidal paralysis never troubles Heywood, who confidently affirms dramatic rebuke as a way to “shape,” “mold,” “fashion,” and “animate” viewers to change their lives for the better.

Heywood’s *Apology* is the period’s most extended discussion of theatre as an engine of moral reform, or what Steven Mullaney calls the “theatre of apprehension.”¹⁷ Mullaney writes that in the generations following the reformation of sacramental penance in England, the popular theatre became a secular forum for self-examination and repentance, where identification with dramatic characters prompted spectators to turn a reflective, judgmental gaze upon themselves.¹⁸ Heywood’s defense of the theatre of apprehension extends the work of earlier apologists including John Harington, from whom he draws the claim that comedies

¹⁷ *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-103.

make spectators “see and shame at their faults,” and Philip Sidney, who argues that the affective power of tragic drama “maketh kings fear to be tyrants.” Sidney illustrates this power with a classical anecdote of Alexander Phereus, a murderous tyrant who was so troubled by an onstage dramatization of tyranny that he left the theatre in tears. Although Phereus had killed many of his subjects without remorse, Sidney writes, he “could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy.”

Sidney’s phrase “sweet violence” evokes both the aesthetic pleasure that attracts spectators’ emotional involvement and the severity with which drama reproves their moral failings. Heywood emphasizes the “violence” side of this equation more than any previous commentator. In addition to “attacking the conscience,” Heywood’s lexicon for drama’s impact includes terrifying, scourging, whipping, killing, choking, drowning, and *afflicting*—a term Shakespeare repeatedly uses to refer to Paulina’s treatment of Leontes. In Heywood’s dream vision of the tragic muse Melpomene, images of violent discipline alternate with figures of shameful exposure and humiliation:

Have I not whipped Vice with a scourge of steel,
Unmasked stern Murder, shamed lascivious Lust,
Plucked off the vizor from grim Treason’s face,
And made the sun point at their ugly sins?
...I have showed Pride his picture on a stage,
laid ope the ugly shapes his steel glass hid,
and made him pass thence meekly. (8-11, 18-20)

These lines present dramatic rebuke in a hyperbolic and somewhat comic light; the muse’s torments afflicts not human spectators, but personifications of the vices themselves. But Heywood makes a more unsettling claim for drama’s forceful effects on real people as he reports two recent performances that led respectable women in the audience to stand up

shrieking, each “finding her conscience... extremely troubled” and “afflicted.” Both women confess to murdering their husbands after witnessing representations of similar murders onstage; after confessing, each woman is quickly “condemned, judged, and burned.” Heywood’s first instance is apparently drawn from the anonymous 1599 play *A Warning for Fair Women*, which editors commonly gloss as the source for Hamlet’s claim that theatre can move “guilty creatures” to confess.

These sensational anecdotes certainly attest to drama’s ability to trouble the conscience, but they are less convincing as proofs for Heywood’s argument that drama reforms spectators’ behavior, to “new-mould the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to any noble and notable attempt.” Even as Heywood works to defend drama as a technology for “new-molding” the heart, his examples describe a kind of theatre whose effect is mainly to expose and punish past offenses. The tension between Heywood’s claim for moral renovation and the current of punitive violence that runs through the *Apology* illuminates the conflict between Paulina’s self-proclaimed “medicinal” intentions and her gratuitous cruelty.

It is unlikely that Shakespeare read Heywood’s *Apology* prior to writing *The Winter’s Tale*, but the two playwrights evidently shared a preoccupation with practices of dramatic rebuke, which Shakespeare had explored in *Hamlet* and would later revisit in *The Tempest*. *Hamlet* shows the limits of drama’s capacity to engender repentance: even when the mousetrap play moves Claudius to attempt a penitent prayer, he remains unwilling to relinquish the “effects” of his crimes. *The Winter’s Tale* explores an opposite extreme: a state of *excessive* penitence, which Paulina’s performances serve not to elicit but to deepen and

prolong. Leontes' encounter with the statue that shames him may look like an exemplary instance of the "theatre of apprehension" praised by apologists—but only if we overlook the fact that, unlike the women in Heywood's anecdotes, Leontes has long since acknowledged his guilt and accepted punishment. Shakespeare's account of that punishment in Acts 3 and 5 draws out the human consequences of the cruelty adumbrated by Heywood's language of attack and exposure.

The unnamed lord who chides Paulina in the trial scene is not alone in his sense that Paulina's punitive discipline has gone too far. Act 5 opens with Cleomenes urging the king to forgive himself and lay his penance aside:

Sir, you have done enough, and have performed
A saint-like sorrow. No fault could you make
Which you have not redeemed; indeed, paid down
more penitence than done trespass. (5.1.1-4)

In the sense of "achieved," "performed" denotes the *completion* of Leontes' penance. Cleomenes construes "penitence" as a work that can be carried out with measurable success, recalling the logic of satisfaction associated with Catholic sacramental penance. This view contrasts sharply with Paulina's earlier insistence that no amount of penitential action could ever move the gods to forgive Leontes. When conceived as a set of actions that can eventually pay down one's transgression, active penitence offers an appealing alternative to the passive despair that Paulina initially urged on the king. But even if it were possible to "do enough," how can Cleomenes know whether Leontes has actually done so? Although this courtier delivered a message from Apollo's oracle during Hermione's trial, he speaks here without any authorization from the gods. His unfounded claim underscores the impossibility of determining how much penitent feeling and action is "enough," or whether penitence

should be thought of as an achievable action at all. The gods' silence on these questions is rendered conspicuous as Cleomenes ventures to speak on their behalf: "Do as the heavens have done, forget your evil; / With them, forgive yourself" (5.1.5-6). Of course, this judgment fails to persuade Leontes and Paulina, who proceed into a series of painful recollections based on the assumption that Leontes can never pay down his offense.

Each time Leontes laments the irreversible harm he did to Hermione, Paulina chimes in to confirm and amplify his self-condemnation, exposing his ugliest crimes like Heywood's tragic muse—or like a personification of conscience itself. When Leontes imagines that remarriage would cause Hermione's spirit to haunt him, Paulina improvises a macabre extension of his penitent fantasy:

Were I the ghost that walked, I'd bid you mark
her eye, and tell me for what dull part in it
you chose her. Then I'd shriek that even your ears
should rift to hear me, and the words that followed
should be, 'Remember mine.' (5.1.63-67)

Cleomenes' opening remarks suggest that over the past several years, Leontes has experienced so many interactions like this that the courtiers cannot bear to watch them any more. Even the king, who consistently affirms that he deserves the "bitterest" rebukes, voices some feeble resistance when Paulina wounds him too severely:

Killed? She I killed? I did so. But thou strik'st me
sorely, to say I did; it is as bitter
Upon thy tongue as in my thought. Good Paulina,
Say so but seldom. (5.1.13-19)

When Paulina mentions the death of Mamillius, Leontes reaches the limits of his endurance for pain: "Prithee no more; cease. Thou knowest/ he dies to me again when talked of" (5.1.118-119).

The excruciating nature of these scenes suggests a second purpose for Cleomenes' statement: he speaks out of frustration after watching the spectacle of Leontes' penance for all these years. "Performed" thus takes on a theatrical sense: Leontes has played the role of penitent under Paulina's direction, openly displaying his sorrow like a saint on a public pilgrimage (or an actor performing in a saint's play). This ongoing performance strikes Cleomenes as excessive, and Shakespeare bears out this impression by presenting the king's penance as an obsession no less consuming than his earlier jealousy.¹⁹ The dual meanings of performance (as completion and as playing a theatrical role) raise the question of whether Leontes' penance constitutes a way to atone for his faults or, conversely, whether this penance keeps him perpetually *attached* to those faults, even defined by them, as the continual practice of recalling them becomes his sole "recreation" (3.2.237).

DEMANDING ANSWERS

The mostly-happy ending of *The Winter's Tale* and the generic expectations of romance lead many readers to interpret Leontes' suffering through a redemptive framework that converts it into a net positive: ultimately, Paulina is hurting Leontes for his own good, and this end justifies her harsh and deceptive means. But if we pause to attend to this pain, then we might understand *The Winter's Tale* differently—not as a triumphant celebration of redemption brought about by secular and dramatic means, but as an exploration of the difficulty of attaining redemption by *any* means, of reaching an endpoint where one has done

¹⁹ Leonard Barkan makes this comparison, writing that Leontes' "heavy-hearted, almost over-enthusiastic penance" shares a "sturm und drang" quality with his initial jealousy ("Living Sculptures": Ovid, Michelangelo, and *The Winter's Tale*," *English Literary History* 48.4 [1981]: 659).

and suffered enough to leave the old sinful self behind and become, in the words of the Elizabethan Homily on Repentance, “a new creature.”

Cleomenes’ remarks focus on Leontes’ individual performance of “saint-like sorrow,” but the play’s concluding lines acknowledge that all of the major characters have played some “part” in the drama of the family’s reconciliation:

Good Paulina,
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand and answer to his part
Performed in this wide gap of time since first
We were dissevered. Hastily lead away. (5.3.151-155)

Leontes anticipates a warm, “leisurely” exchange in which the family will answer the questions raised by this scene: where Perdita lived, how Hermione preserved herself, and so on. But his diction, “demand and answer,” casts some doubt on the prospect of a pleasant reconciliation. The term “answer” has been fraught with moral significance throughout the play as characters use it to acknowledge or displace moral liability. Hermione tells Polixenes and Leontes that “th’offences we have made you do we’ll answer, if you first sinned with us” (1.2.82-3), and Paulina concludes her list of offenses in the trial scene by claiming that Leontes’ other crimes are not “laid to [his] answer,” but the queen’s death is (3.2.196). The word accumulates an additional sense of repaying a moral or monetary debt when Paulina welcomes the king to her chapel: “All my services / you have paid home,” she tells Leontes, but deigning to visit her “poor house” represents “a surplus of your grace, which never / My life may last to answer” (5.3.7-8).

By using a term that conjoins the practices of narrating one’s actions and confronting one’s moral liability, Shakespeare raises the possibility of further trials to come, in which

each character will be obliged to vindicate her actions (to give an account of herself). We might well imagine that new injuries will arise during such a conversation; Hermione's explanation of how she collaborated with Paulina's deception would likely deflate the miraculous aura that has surrounded her return. Paulina anticipates this disenchantment when she cuts off explanations for the time being: "there's time enough for that,/ lest they desire upon this push to trouble / your joys with like relation" (5.3.127-130). These lines shadow forth Shakespeare's recognition that the wondrous warmth of reconciliation is bound to fade once "relation" resumes. This recognition holds true whether we read "relation" as *telling*, the way Paulina means it here, or as *interaction* between people who have hurt one another, the difficult realities of which mark this joyful reunion scene as finite and fragile.

Of course, it is impossible to verify the speculation that a tense exchange of demands and defenses, rather than a leisurely round of storytelling, awaits the Sicilian and Bohemian royal families after their hasty departure from the chapel. But such a scene would fit well into a prevailing pattern of *The Winter's Tale*, in which characters take it upon themselves to administer judgment to each other (rather than leaving judgment to the gods), staging trials, confessions, exposures, and punishments in order to hold one another accountable for real and imagined breaches of trust. Even in the play's opening exchanges of courtly generosity and gratitude, Shakespeare sets the stage for a drama fraught with proliferating obligations and debts. The condition of owing an "answer" to some judge, whether human or divine, seems inescapable, except within Polixenes' fantasy of childhood innocence:

Had we pursued that life
and our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared

With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
Boldly, 'not guilty,' the imposition cleared
Hereditary ours. (1.2.71-74)

The conclusion of *The Winter's Tale* places enchanted and disenchanted interpretations in tension with each other. Hermione's return may be read as a miraculous, transcendent event, or as a spectacle brought about solely by human actions; some critics paradoxically conjoin these views, calling Hermione's resurrection a "secular miracle."²⁰ Even readers who acknowledge that the reanimation is a staged illusion often insist that it remains "infused with the aura of resurrection."²¹ For many critics, this aura reveals the redemptive power of theatre itself.

While Jonathan Bate, Walter Lim, and others suggest that the statue scene confirms the triumph of drama as an alternative to religion, another common critical practice of re-enchantment is to claim that the scene's numinous quality derives from ordinary family life, which Shakespeare finally invests with transcendent significance, affirming "the sheer marvel of everyday human beings" and presenting forgiveness itself as a miracle.²² This sanctifying of ordinary life, or what Helen Cooper calls "sacramentalizing of the secular," is widely viewed as a defining characteristic of Shakespeare's romances.²³ For C.L. Barber, affirmation of "the-sacred-in-the-human" represents a crucial distinction between Shakespeare's tragedies, which dramatize the unsuccessful struggle to find "the incarnation of final meaning in immediate, human life," and his romances, which restore this once-lost sense of

²⁰ See, for instance, Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 105, and Marguerite Tassi, *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama* (Susquehanna University Press, 2005), 201.

²¹ Ewan Fernie, "Introduction," *Spiritual Shakespeares*, 4.

²² Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 251.

incarnation.²⁴ The critical tendency to discover “secular miracles” and “secular faith” in *The Winter’s Tale* suggests that we have not moved far from Barber’s insight: critics are also looking for a recovery of the-sacred-in-the-human, and we seek it with particular intensity and faith in the romances. Critics’ celebration of the statue scene as a “secular miracle” betrays a certain desire to have it both ways—say, to read Shakespeare as spiritual, but not religious. But I have suggested Shakespeare offers a less optimistic vision of secular reform: when judgment, punishment, and forgiveness become detached from sacramental religious practice, we are left with even less of a “lawful” structure to restrain people’s brutality towards each other. When critics dwell exclusively on the marvelous potential of ordinary human relationships reflected in this scene, they obscure the other realities that Shakespeare challenges us to recognize: the ugliness and “trouble” that haunt even the most heartwarming moments of “relation.”

Modern critics find Shakespeare especially appealing as a source of “ethics freed from the restrictions of prescriptive thought” and religious doctrine.²⁵ They find an ethical message in *The Winter’s Tale*, and take Shakespeare as a replacement for the authorities (priests, scripture, tradition) that prescribe moral rules in more structured, systematic settings. But Shakespeare’s emphasis on the destructive effects of theatrical manipulation reveals his reluctance to being taken as an ethical authority. He knows that the arts of puppetry, image-making, and role-playing can have potent effects on audiences, maybe even transformative ones, but he registers the dark implications of such effects at least as much as

²⁴ C.L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare’s Power of Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 28 and 298.

²⁵ Knapp, “Visual and Ethical Truth in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004), 254.

he celebrates them. Some “magic” is damaging and dangerous even if it is “lawful”—a rough magic that Shakespeare might be tempted to abjure, one that revives corpses, rubs salt into wounds, prolongs sufferers’ grief. Shakespeare embeds instances of abuse within the play as if to signal that audiences should not acquiesce too readily to the enchantments of drama, even when these seem to offer the precious gift of redemption through self-recognition. When people use art to torture and punish others, the risks are high, and the possibilities of bad faith ever-present.

Even if no miracle occurs in the statue scene, does Shakespeare figure forth some sense of non-miraculous redemption? Perhaps Leontes is partially redeemed in the sense that he is no longer obsessed by his own sin, and in the sense that Hermione has forgiven him (if we interpret her silent embrace as evidence of forgiveness). When Hermione and Leontes return to one another in silence, they have shed the roles they played throughout the king’s wintry, static period of penance: the penitent and the wronged victim/martyr/saint. No longer defined by these roles, they instead become flawed people, who each owe each other forgiveness and apology—a forgiveness that may or may not ever be realized. They accept the risk of shunning and hurting each other again. But this redemption is compromised by the absence of Mamillius and by the lingering uncertainty that attends this scene: Shakespeare offers no guarantee that Hermione forgives Leontes or that he has forgiven himself. Critics who ascribe miraculous significance to Leontes’ reunion with his family—reading it as a once-and-for-all redemption made possible by grace, drama, or ordinary interpersonal forgiveness—overlook Shakespeare’s suggestion that reconciliation will

demand continuous work from both Leontes and Hermione, each of whom turns out to have wronged the other.

The ambiguities of the statue scene suggest that redemption without religion may be possible, but it is embattled and vulnerable, subject to manipulation by the human agents who carry it out, and in constant need of renewal. Religious narratives offer the appealing fantasy of *lasting* redemption, assured and authorized by the gods. Theatre, too, may temporarily ease the wearying experience of this-worldly penitence by dramatizing wondrous stories in which that fantasy is realized. Autolycus's puppet show of the prodigal son story (4.3.94-95) might have provided just this kind of pleasure to its audience. But in the secular world, Shakespeare implies, reckoning with one's past sins is ultimately a solitary and continuous struggle; this struggle has ethical value insofar as it makes the penitent vigilant against doing further damage. For Shakespeare, recognizing that no miracle, secular or otherwise, can fully release us from the human consequences of our actions constitutes an important form of ethical responsibility.

DESIRING LIFE

The preceding criticisms of Paulina's penitential discipline might lead to the conclusion that interpersonal penitence is ultimately impossible in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes' penance does not issue in divine forgiveness or self-forgiveness, and it is not clear that his daily torments contribute meaningfully to his reconciliation with the people he has harmed. Yet the play's perspective on penitence is not altogether bleak. After all, Leontes does not commit suicide like his predecessor Pandosto, and he never even appears to consider this as

an option. In this respect, Paulina's harsh counsel in Act 3—"betake thee to nothing but despair"—differs from the rhetoric of Spenser's Despair, who tries to persuade Redcrosse that suicide is the only logical conclusion to draw from a sense of his own sinfulness

Why does Leontes go on living for all those years? In my discussion of the trial scene, I suggested one possible reason: suicide would be an evasion of Leontes' felt obligations towards his wife and son, to weep and pray at their graves every day, and to subject himself to "shame perpetual." But Leontes discloses a second possible reason in Act 5, when Florizel's arrival moves him to recall his lost friendship with Polixenes:

I lost—
All mine own folly—the society,
Amity too, of your brave father; whom,
Though bearing misery, I desire my life
Once more to look on him. (5.1.133-36)

Leontes' acknowledgment of his own folly, interjected into these lines like a compulsive tic, is consistent with the habitual pattern of self-condemnation he has developed over the years. This pattern dominates his subsequent conversation with Florizel as he laments, "The wrongs I have done thee stir afresh within me" (5.1.147-48), and "I have done sin" (5.1.170). But against the familiar backdrop of this weary penitential routine, an unexpected emotion emerges: desire for life. This desire, Leontes notes, exists in tension with the misery that he bears every day; it is the only non-penitential feeling he has voiced since his tragic recognition in Act 3.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Spenser rewrites Christian penitential narratives in the *Legend of Courtesy*. He defers both the Catholic endpoint of penal satisfaction (figured as "acquittal") and the Protestant endpoint of radical rebirth as a new

creature. In place of these traditional conclusions, Spenser envisions a more modest and secular outcome: penance issues in compassionate social interactions within this world. Shakespeare's brief mention of Leontes' desire to see his friend again effects a similar revision of penitential discourse. In this moment, Shakespeare replaces the consolation that Protestant divines typically offered to suffering penitents—faith in the remission of sins through Christian grace—with a hope for restored “society and amity,” a hope strong enough to sustain Leontes' desire to live even in the midst of his misery.

When Leontes and Polixenes finally do reunite, the Bohemian king tries to release his friend from the grip of his past actions in an extraordinarily selfless statement:

Dear my brother,
Let him that was the cause of this have power
To take off so much grief from you as he
Will piece up in himself. (5.3.53-55)

Polixenes here echoes the counsel of Cleomenes, who tries to persuade Leontes that he has suffered enough, and Camillo, who tells him to let go of a sorrow that was “too sore laid on” and has been excessively prolonged (5.3.49-53). But rather than invoking the gods' forgiveness as Cleomenes did, or referring to an implied measure of how much suffering is enough (or too much), Polixenes speaks altogether outside of the terms of economy and reckoning. He does *not* tell Leontes to let go of his suffering because he deserves to be forgiven, because the gods have forgiven him, or because he has met some standard of sufficiency. He simply voices the desire to take some of that suffering off of Leontes and bear it himself, regardless of desert or merit. Polixenes' irrational identification of himself as the “cause of this” indicates a willingness to overlook Leontes' true culpability.

In the midst of the grim processes of reckoning and affliction that characterize Paulina's penitential discipline throughout Act 5, these moments of friendly outreach offer two interstitial glimpses of a less damaging approach to interpersonal penitence.²⁶ In the first, Shakespeare casts friendship as a sustaining force that can make the endurance of penitential suffering possible. In the second, he imagines that a friend can offer comfort by sharing in the penitent's grief. Paulina's cruelty demonstrates that if the goal of social intervention is to induce contrition and reform the penitent, then that intervention can do more harm than good. Yet companions can provide other forms of comfort, including entertainment, friendship, and shared suffering. People should not take it upon themselves to administer penitential discipline, Shakespeare suggests, but the play's conclusion restores some hope that friends can provide confidence and therapeutic counsel, as Camillo once did for Leontes.

These two possibilities are left largely undeveloped within *The Winter's Tale*—Leontes, enthralled by the sight of the statue, does not even respond in words to Polixenes' consolation—but they represent germinal alternatives to the severe moralism of Leontes' penitential regime. If this play offers any relatively hopeful vision of penitence, it emerges not in the main plot of Paulina's scorched-earth discipline and Leontes' endless tears, but on

²⁶ I adapt the term "interstitial" from Charles Frey, who writes that Acts 1-3 of *The Winter's Tale* are characterized by a repetitive pattern: in each scene, we witness Leontes expelling others and isolating himself. But in the subplots of these opening acts, with Leontes offstage, Shakespeare counteracts this dominant motif of isolation with a pattern of cooperation and trust between paired figures such as Camillo and Polixenes, Paulina and Emilia, Cleomenes and Deon. For Frey, these "small interstitial" scenes "grasp hopefully at generative continuity and renewal," inviting the audience to anticipate "a more sane idiom of praise, prayer and hope" after the tragic extremity of Leontes' destructive actions. See "Tragic Structure in *The Winter's Tale*: The Affective Dimension," in *William Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 96.

the play's periphery, among (mostly Bohemian) supporting characters. Redemption never occurs, but something else valuable emerges in its place: the ongoing, ultimately solitary work of living with one's own past sins. It is not others' place to initiate this work, to worsen it, or to judge when we have done enough of it. But others can help to piece up some of our grief within themselves, to "bear a part" with us. Cooperation and comfort cannot wash sins away or undo the irrevocable harm we have caused, here signified by the irrecoverable loss of Mamillius. But they can help us bear the endless work of penitence, or, in Milton's words, to "lighten each other's burden in our share of woe."

Conclusion: Making an End of It

The task of conclusion presents distinctive challenges for a project that is largely about the difficulty of reaching a definitive endpoint. Two of the romances I have considered, the *New Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene*, are historically unfinished. All three, I have suggested, thematize irresolution and formally defer conclusions in ways that correspond to the cultural problem of inconclusive penitence in post-Reformation Christianity. Previous studies of penitence in Renaissance literature have focused on the genres of drama and lyric,¹ but my project has sought to demonstrate an affinity between the emotional difficulties of penitential experience and the literary structure of romance, a cross-generic mode characterized by the frustration and deferral of hoped-for resolutions. As I set out to compose these concluding reflections, I was reminded of an emotionally charged representation of writing in Sidney's *New Arcadia*: Musidorus's struggle to finish an apology letter to Pamela, a scene that first alerted me to the overlap between penitential and authorial experiences of endlessness.

[N]ever pen did more quakingly perform his office; never was paper more double-moistened with ink and tears; never words more slowly married together, and never the Muses more tired than now with changes and re-changes of his devices; fearing how to end before he had resolved how to begin, mistrusting each word, condemning each sentence. This word was not significant; that word was too plain: this would not be conceived; the other would be ill-conceived...

¹ See Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Heather Hirschfeld, *The End of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Peter Iver Kaufman, *Prayer, Despair, and Drama* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and Clare Costley King'oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

At last, marring with mending and putting out better than he left, he made an end of it and being ended, was divers times ready to tear it, till his reason assuring him the more he studied the worse it grew, he folded it up, devoutly invoking good acceptation unto it... (437)

Sidney's line, "He made an end of it and being ended, was divers times ready to tear it," formally illustrates the difficulty of finishing that constitutes a central part of this dissertation's subject matter as well as a fear haunting my own writing process. Sidney's hurried cadence—"He made an end of it *and being ended*, was divers times ready to tear it"—momentarily posits an end to Musidorus's tortured self-scrutiny, only to unravel that apparent ending and prolong his character's suffering without so much as a comma or sentence break. This sense of irresolution is further heightened by the incompleteness of Sidney's fiction, an accident of history. Musidorus folds the letter and places it on Pamela's writing desk, but we never learn how she would have responded and whether she would have forgiven him; she is captured and imprisoned in Cecropia's castle, and Sidney's narrative breaks off mid-sentence (and mid-swordfight) before she ever has a chance to respond to Musidorus's letter.

Musidorus' struggle to "testify his repentance" in this passage highlights a continuity between Catholic and Protestant penitential concerns that my dissertation has yet to fully account for: the effort to body forth internal states in narrative, to give them a local habitation and a name. The sacrament of penance had traditionally served as a visible outward sign of inner contrition, but even after penance was no longer regarded as a sacrament, Protestants continued to regard verbal expressions and practices of penitence as "testaments" of an inner emotional reality that only God could perceive directly. As I continue developing this project, I hope to more fully consider the ways in which the inner

experience of penitence both invites and ultimately eludes narrative representation. Spenser works to make penitence visible through personification allegory (Penance disciplining Redcrosse with an iron whip), while Shakespeare moves Leontes' sixteen years of penitential "recreation" offstage. Dramatic action provides one possible way around the challenges of representing penitence and its resolutions, since physical gestures can evoke emotional states that defy verbal expression. In both *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, reconciliation is marked by silent embraces rather than spoken exchanges of apology and forgiveness, which leaves open to interpretation the question of whether Hermione and Innogen have truly forgiven the men who wronged them.² These mysterious embraces, precisely because they cannot be taken to guarantee a definitive or lasting forgiveness, highlight what Sarah Beckwith describes as the "infinitely precious and fragile" nature of all human reconciliations.³

The Protestant ideal of penitence as *metanoia*, modeled upon the conversion of St. Paul, assumes the existence of a stable, unified self: an utterly depraved sinner who transforms into an utterly redeemed new man. But in this passage, Sidney represents his penitent protagonist's self as inexorably divided and unstable. Musidorus fears and condemns his own writing; second-guesses each word even as he writes it; and sabotages his conclusions before he has even decided how to begin. As in the passage about Gynecia's

² For a recent discussion of the significance of Hermione hanging about Leontes' neck, see Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Judging Forgiveness: Hannah Arendt, W.H. Auden, and *The Winter's Tale*," *New Literary History* 45.4 (2014): 641-663. Lupton argues that Hermione has not yet forgiven Leontes at the conclusion of the statue scene, but that her invocation of the gods to bless their daughter Perdita affirms her commitment to sharing a life with him and leaves open the possibility that she may yet forgive him in the future. As a "supplement to forgiveness," Hermione's blessing "prepar[es] the ground for a forgiveness to come while calling attention to the fact that sometimes forgiveness is most conducive to transformation when it remains incipient rather than achieved" (655).

³ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 11.

suffering that I discuss in the Introduction (see pages 3-4), in which the penitent's faculty of "reason" begins to "tear itself with anguish," Musidorus's internal divisions do not neatly correspond to commonplace divisions between reason and passion: the prince's "reason" reinforces his self-attacking emotions, convincing him that his writing is growing worse the more he works at it.

For Michel de Montaigne, it is precisely the self's general stability—its conformity to a "universal form" of behavior, including habitual sins and vices—that makes true repentance exceedingly difficult and rare. In his essay "Du Repentir," Montaigne distinguishes repentance from a general desire to be a different kind of person:

For my part, I may in general wish to be other than I am; I may condemn and mislike my universall forme, I may beseech God to grant me an undefiled reformation..but meseemeth I ought not to terme this repentance, no more than the displeasure of being neither Angell nor Cato. My actions are squared to what I am and conformed to my condition. I cannot do better.⁴

As Richard Strier argues, Montaigne finds the idea of thoroughly repudiating one's sinful nature or "universal form" unintelligible: to disown vices rooted within our own nature is "self-contradictory."⁵ Montaigne regards the prospect of real repentance with deep skepticism, yet he does not ultimately consider it impossible; rather, he states that it must be visited upon us through divine agency. "I acknowledge no repentance that is superficial, meane, and ceremonious," he writes. "It must touch me on all sides before I can terme it repentance. It must pinch my entrails, and afflict them as deeply and thoroughly as God

⁴ Michel de Montaigne. *Essays written in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne...*, trans. John Florio (London, 1613), 455.

⁵ Richard Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 221.

himself beholds me.”⁶ For Montaigne, true repentance is not something sinners can achieve through our own volition; it occurs only if God touches our hearts, grips our entrails, and afflicts us thoroughly. As Strier notes, although Montaigne generally defends Catholic sacramental traditions, this view of repentance “as a gift rather than an attainment or an institutional process”⁷ grants him surprising harmony with the views of Protestant reformers.

This dissertation has emphasized the transformations of penitential doctrine that attended the English Reformation, but even this brief glimpse at Montaigne’s remarks reveals that the anxieties I have described—including uncertainty about what counts as true, thorough repentance and whether sinners can voluntarily initiate that repentance—were hardly distinctive to English Protestant communities. A more comprehensive study of penitence in the Renaissance would situate English Reformation developments within the broader context of medieval and continental culture. Jean Delumeau’s *Sin and Fear* (1983) is one foundational investigation of penitence from the thirteenth through eighteenth centuries, though more recent historical scholarship has qualified Delumeau’s thesis that Western Europe during this period was dominated exclusively by pessimism and fear.⁸ (For my part, I have sought to somewhat temper Delumeau’s bleak account by incorporating the

⁶ Ibid., 456.

⁷ Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance*, 227.

⁸ Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries*. Trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990). For a critique of Delumeau’s thesis and other “grand narratives” of the history of emotions in Europe, including Norbert Elias’ *The Civilizing Process*, see Barbara Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *The American Historical Review* 107.3 (2002): 834-837.

voices of divines who offered believers consolation and practical pathways through the potentially overwhelming darkness of penitence.)

This project could be fruitfully expanded to incorporate chapters on medieval romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, building on the work of Anne McTaggart, Lee Patterson, and others who have illuminated the importance of sacramental penance to medieval subjectivity.⁹ I have arguably overstated the degree to which the Reformation introduced new problems of penitence; a more nuanced discussion incorporating medieval texts would examine how the sacrament of penance itself fell short of providing consolation and closure, despite the ritual authority of priestly absolution. The ambiguity of sacramental absolution is evident in *Sir Gawain* when the hero continues to even after he is ritually forgiven and pronounced pure. The host's declaration that Gawain is as pure in virtue as a pearl, "the most perfect paladin ever to pace the earth" (2364), provides little consolation to the knight, who remains overcome by a sense of shame (2372).¹⁰ In this sense, the host's assurance that Gawain has paid down his offense proves no more definitive than Gawain's earlier absolution in the chapel, where a priest "absolved" him "with certainty" and sent him away "so pure/that Doomsday could have been declared the day after" (1883-1884)—a

⁹ Anne McTaggart, *Shame and Guilt in Chaucer*, and Lee Patterson, "The Subject of Confession: The Pardoner and the Rhetoric of Confession," in *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): 367-421. According to Patterson, the sacrament of penance constituted the most "profound" and "ubiquitous" medium through which the church affected medieval Christians' lives (374). Additional studies of penitence in medieval literature include Katherine Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Mary Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (London: Associated University Press, 1983); and Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Brian Stone (New York: Penguin Books, 1974).

purity that many readers find compromised by the fact that Gawain continues to secretly hold onto the protective girdle. By repeatedly pronouncing Gawain “pure” and then calling that purity into question, the poet anticipates Spenser’s treatment of the Redcrosse Knight, whose perfection is repeatedly undone within the House of Holinesse. These deferrals of completion and purity suggest that the completion of penance constitutes a literary preoccupation across the boundaries of medieval-Renaissance periodization.

In addition to expanding this project’s historical scope, I hope to devote further attention to the intersections between penitence, sexuality, and gender. Most of the transgressions I have considered are sexual in nature; narratives of penitence in Renaissance romance often begin with scenes of jealousy, infidelity, and mistrust, perceived violations of lovers’ commitments and obligations to each other. Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight abandons Una after falsely suspecting her of betraying him; Mirabella scorns the “worthy” knights who sue for her love and takes sadistic joy in laughing at their pain; Gynecia and Basilius each repent for straying from their marriage; and most of Amphialus’s compromises and fatal missteps are driven by his desire to keep the woman he loves close by, even if he can only do so by imprisoning her against her will. Moreover, penitence itself (not just sin) could be said to activate libidinal and sexual energies within these texts; I have described Amphialus’s vision of the blood spilling from Parthenia’s pallid body just after he wounds her as “aestheticized,” but it could equally well be described as eroticized, as if Sidney is linking the irrevocability of this fatal wound to that of defloration. Some of my readers have also noted shades of masochism emerging in Leontes’ ongoing consent to Paulina’s torments; perhaps he takes a perverse pleasure in his penitential “recreations,” in the absence of other joys

from his desolate kingdom.¹¹ An inquiry into the dark pleasures of penitence would consider the possibility that for some characters, it may feel easier to go on torturing oneself in solitude than to take the massive risk of releasing oneself from penitence and re-enter relations with others in the social world.

Further research on the sexual dimensions of penitence might consider how penitential practices and narratives differ along gender lines: are women less likely to arrive at an endpoint to penance than men? Are women more closely scrutinized and held accountable for their sins, particularly sexual sins (including desires never realized in action)? Why is Gynecia's suffering so internal and isolating, never confessed to others, while Amphialus's suffering is spectacularly externalized as a bodily spectacle that infects everyone around him with shared grief? Why are the personifications of Mirabella's faults, Scorn and Disdain, gendered male? (Could we read this as a suggestion that these are themselves products of male fantasy?)

The preceding chapters have often referred to characters' experiences of "guilt and shame" as if these emotions were interchangeable, eliding a significant body of debate about these emotions within philosophy, cultural theory, and the social sciences. One of my principal goals in future writing is to more fully theorize the distinctions between these complex emotions and their respective ethical implications. Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* holds that while guilt refers to specific acts I have committed, shame refers to "what I am"; under shame, I not only regret my actions, but I feel exposed as a flawed and

¹¹ On Reformation-era penitential theology and masochism, see John Yamamoto-Wilson, *Pain, Pleasure, and Perversity: Discourses of Suffering in Seventeenth-Century England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013). Yamamoto-Wilson argues that during the seventeenth century, self-inflicted penitential suffering came to be viewed as a form of sexual deviance.

deficient person.¹² As Stanley Cavell puts it, “Under shame, what must be covered up is not your deed, but yourself.”¹³ Recent disagreements about shame’s ethical value in philosophy and cultural theory hinge on the question of whether this feeling of exposure can be salutary, motivating agents to change themselves for the better. For some commentators, shame is more damaging and intractable than guilt precisely because it attaches to a whole person rather than her discrete actions.¹⁴ But others argue that shame’s reference to the whole self is in fact what makes this feeling generative, since it motivates people to transform their whole

¹² Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 93; see 88-94 for a more thorough discussion of the distinctions between guilt and shame. Williams argues that “we can feel both guilt and shame towards the same action. In a moment of cowardice, we let someone down: we feel guilty because we have let them down, ashamed because we have contemptibly fallen short of what we might have hoped of ourselves. As always, the action stands between the inner world of disposition, feeling, and decision and an outer world of harm and wrong. *What I have done* points in one direction towards what has happened to others, in another direction to what I am” (92).

¹³ Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 49. Cavell aligns this distinction with a more traditional division between shame as a social experience of exposure to the sight of others and guilt as an internal feeling we can experience even if no one else witnesses or knows about our transgressions: “Shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at; the avoidance of the sight of others is the reflex it produces. Guilt is different; there the reflex is to avoid discovery. As long as no one *knows* what you have done, you are safe; or your conscience will press you to confess it and accept punishment” (49).

¹⁴ Gabrielle Taylor formulates the distinction as follows: “If I have done wrong then there is some way in which I can ‘make up’ for it, if only by suffering punishment. But how can I possibly make up for what I now see I am? There are no steps that suggest themselves here. There is nothing to be done, and it is best to withdraw and not to be seen. This is the typical reaction when feeling shame. Neither punishment nor forgiveness can here perform a function.” (*Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985], 90). Paul Cefalu advances a similar view in his discussion of Sidney’s *Arcadia*, noting that Gynecia’s shame builds upon itself and drives her to still worse behavior; unlike guilt, Cefalu writes, shame cannot be countered with “acts of repentance or purification” (*Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 22).

selves rather than just making amends for particular actions.¹⁵ Some recent theorists suggest that an emphasis on shame may offer an alternative foundation for ethics (in place of an emphasis on guilt and conscience). Such an ethic would be founded on the recognition of our shared vulnerability to shame itself.¹⁶

I want to close with a brief admission of my own vulnerability. Readers will probably be unsurprised to learn that I wrote this dissertation during a time when I myself was struggling with penitence and self-attack, along with the relentless self-consciousness about writing that Musidorus evinces. Like Sidney's penitent prince, I have cried onto these pages; marred them with mending; and fought the desire to discard them entirely. In Chapter 1, I cite Virginia Woolf's statement that at such emotionally charged moments of this fiction, readers witness "Sidney's own anger...and his pain." I have argued that Sidney's representations of penitence should not be regarded solely as emanations of his own individual psychology but as engagements with a collective concern in post-Reformation England; Musidorus's struggle to express repentance convincingly and conclusively reveals the collective pain shared by Sidney's whole generation. But I have hesitated to add an additional modification to Woolf's claim: when I read Sidney's representations of

¹⁵ See, for instance, Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), 17.

¹⁶ Anne McTaggart suggests that "our capacity to empathize, and thus to feel guilty about harming others, emerges primarily from our awareness that we share with others a basic vulnerability to shame" (*Shame and Guilt in Chaucer* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012], 12). Queer theorist and art historian Douglas Crimp finds an ethical alternative to empathy in this sense of shared vulnerability. "In the act of taking on the same that is properly someone else's," Crimp writes, "I simultaneously feel my utter separateness... I do not share in the other's identity... I put myself in the place of the other only insofar as I recognize that I too am prone to shame" ("Mario Montez, for Shame," in David Clark, ed., *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* [New York: Routledge, 2002], 65).

psychological suffering, I recognize an evocation of *my* pain. Do such emotional responses have any legitimate place in critical writing?

It may seem strange, not to say self-indulgent, to find reflections of my own experience in these historically remote melodramas of truant knights, disdainful beauties, and royal families strained by suspicion and infidelity. Such self-recognition is arguably better addressed in other genres, like the diary or personal essay, than in criticism; this assumption has led me to adopt a comic or apologetic tone whenever I note points of contact between my own emotions and those of the characters (and, I speculate, the authors) whom I study. Yet I am not alone in my sense that the increasingly precarious profession of literary scholarship could be enriched, rather than compromised, by critics' willingness to reflect openly on how our objects of study get under our skins and activate our most painful sensitivities, those we might be most tempted to resist or disown.¹⁷

Musidorus is repeatedly tempted to tear his letter up, an act of total destruction analogous to the extreme model of penitence that seeks to utterly annihilate the old man and start anew. He never feels that the document is complete or even that it represents his best possible effort. Rather, he sends it out because he feels this choice to be the lesser of two evils; his love, his remorse, and his desire for Pamela's forgiveness finally outweigh his overwhelming dissatisfaction with the writing he has produced. In the conclusion of Chapter 3, I suggest that Shakespeare figures ordinary social relations of cooperation and caregiving as imperfect but therapeutic alternatives to religious processes—ways to live on in the absence

¹⁷ For a defense of openly personal criticism that does not pretend to objectivity, as well as a discussion of the dangers of sentimentality and solipsism that attend such criticism, see William McKenzie and Theodora Papadopoulou's Introduction to their edited volume, *Shakespeare and I* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 1-18.

of ritual absolution and other putatively definitive conclusions for penitential experience. In the midst of his fear and exhaustion (“never the Muses more tired than now with changes and re-changes”), Musidorus’ pragmatic decision to “make an end of it” and entrust his letter to Pamela suggests that social relationships might also ease the solitary suffering of a writer who struggles to stop criticizing himself. A writer can no more pronounce his own work complete than a penitent can pronounce himself forgiven,¹⁸ but he can hope that the reader’s judgments will be more lenient than his own.

Like many of the literary conclusions I have considered in this study—conclusions brought about not by the settling of moral accounts or the thorough completion of a penitent’s assigned labors, but by practical exigencies, like a family’s need to go on living together—the end of Musidorus’s solitary struggle is precarious and provisional. It is not conferred from above by an authoritative deity or institution, but “made” by human work. This project remains a work in progress. To “make an end of it” is not to resolve the questions I have considered once and for all, but to submit an imperfect attempt, pause, and await responses: a secular leap of faith.

¹⁸ If we accept Beckwith’s claim that forgiveness is necessarily an exchange between two or more people, the whole notion of self-forgiveness becomes conceptually incoherent: *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 133.

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